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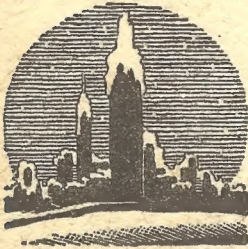
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A Complete Short Novel



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By LEIGH BRACKETT

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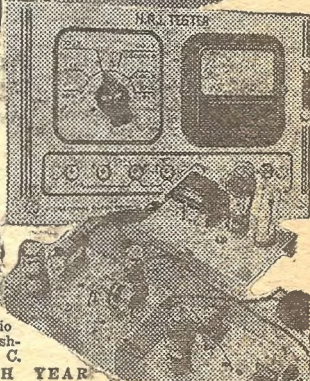
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A DEPARTMENT FOR SCIENCE FICTION FANS

FOR a number of decades the world of science fiction was pretty much exclusively a male world. While boys of all ages and castes, united by the umbilical cord of soaring impersonal imagination, delved into the works of Verne, Wells, Conan Doyle, *Tom Swift* and the like, the girls seemed content with *Little Elsie* or the sub-erotic sublimations of E. M. Hull, Ethel M. Dell and other experts in the manufacture of machine-tooled glamour to provide frosting for the solid cake layers of recipes and fashion patterns and little essays on beauty culture.

Primeval clubs and gatherings of science fiction addicts were strictly Little Scorpion affairs. Only rarely did some space-minded Tomboy Taylor manage to crash them. And as a rule she had to keep her hair short and her mind on the refreshments rather than the boys if she hoped to survive in membership.

Women didn't really exist in the stories of the era either—save as opposite numbers to prophylactic Western heroes and such an occasional *She*-like creature as the late Stanley Weinbaum's Margaret of Urbs. Save for a few seldom-heard-from ladies like Lilith Lorraine and M. Rupert and a very few others, women did little writing in the field.

Yes, for quite a time as time is counted these days, science fiction was a world for men and men only.

The Great Invasion

However, at some indeterminate point in the nineteen thirties something happened. Just how or why it happened lies beyond our current ken but at any rate the girls got interested and began to move in. This meta-

morphosis—called either the Great Invasion or the Great Erosion depending upon the point of view—is too well and too long established to be regarded as any mere passing trend. The girls are in and in to stay.

A number of women writers, ranging from adequate to brilliant, began to turn out science fiction stories of such excellence that in magazine after magazine they grabbed their share not only of inside short stories but of lead novelets and novels, hitherto an exclusively masculine prerogative.

Certainly the fantasies of C. L. Moore were and are as fine as any in the field. And right up alongside her work we have today that of E. Mayne Hull, Leigh Brackett, Margaret St. Clair, Judith Merril, Catherine MacLean, Betsy Curtis, and Miriam Allen deFord, to say nothing of an ambitious platoon of youngsters who are promising to crash into print professionally at almost any moment.

Husbands and Wives

Naturally, with such a group of talented women writers practising successfully for more than a dozen years, the entire story-perspective on women in science fiction has changed. It is no longer uncommon to find a female chief protagonist in an stf story—and not a two-dimensional valentine or a cold-fire priestess-empress but a female who acts, talks and thinks like a woman alive.

Furthermore both Miss Hull and Miss Brackett married science fiction authors of renown—A. E. van Vogt and Edmond Hamilton respectively—and their influence on their talented husbands has made itself felt in the matter of endowing their menfolks'

female creations with a trio of dimensions. C. L. Moore's sensitivity has been of immeasurable aid in giving depth and reality to the heroines and other she-creatures of her multi-faceted spouse, Henry Kuttner.

Seldom if ever has a single field of fiction been so thoroughly spanned by three such husband-wife combinations as Hull-van Vogt, Brackett-Hamilton and Moore-Kuttner. Should you choose to regard this as an infiltration process, you will have to admit that the girls not only aimed high but got there.

It is our hunch that while the A-bomb, the V-2 rocket and the so-called Flying Saucer have had much to do with giving science fiction a far wider field of reader interest than the authors, editors and publishers conceived of a decade ago, it is these women writers who have played a vital role in making stf acceptable to a more adult market.

The space opera of ten, fifteen or twenty years ago—however clever its pseudo-scientific gadgetry, however vast its galactic scope—was basically little more than an elaborate *Tom Swift* or *Rover Boys* story. Its characters—we use the word in an entirely figurative sense—were mere appendages to its machinery and its dialogue was hopeless *gee-whiz* sub-adolescent.

A Good Influence

We think the girls had a large hand in fixing all that. Space opera—fine, but they wanted it peopled with folk who aroused emotional belief. They got them.

As these writers were establishing themselves other young women began to make their presence felt in the reader's columns of this and other stf magazines. They leaped recklessly into hitherto stag fan-controversies, thereby livening up same not only through the freshness of their approach but through the rebuttals they drew from resenting males.

Fan clubs and fan magazines began more and more to develop feminine brightness and neatness and the boys, forced to look to their laurels, lost much of that lingering dinginess which seems inevitably to accompany the all-male in print or in person. After all, why does the peacock preen? Hardly for other peacocks.

The girls have not yet blossomed into full

(Continued on page 140)

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A SHORT NOVEL

by LEIGH BRACKETT



The CITADEL of LOST AGES

CHAPTER I

Strange Awakening

DARKNESS—nothingness—a void and a voice that spoke to him across the muffled deeps. "Remember! Think, and remember! Who are you?"

It was painful to be thus aroused. And yet he tried to answer and could not. He said, "I don't know."

"Yes, you know. You can remember if you will. *Who are you?*"

The voice continued to torture him, calm and insistent, and in order to quiet it he tried desperately to remember.

Out of a past beyond man's memory, the Numi priests draw from Fenway's mind the secret of an icebound cave that holds the key to the future!

It seemed that he should know. He had known, once.

"I am . . ."

A pause, a groping and then, "I am—Fenway."

"Ah!" said the voice. "Good! You see, you do know—you can remember. Now—*where* are you, Fenway? Where?"

Again he answered, "I don't know." The mists were thick and he was growing tired.

But the voice went on. "You are walking, Fenway. There is a street, buildings, people. Where are you going?"

Suddenly he knew. Of course he knew! He must have been asleep or dreaming not to know. He was walking down the Avenue of the Americas. He had just left his office in Rockefeller Center. It was dusk and a thin snow was falling. He could see the immense towers of the city leaping skyward, their ledges rimmed with white, their myriad windows blazing and above them in the smother the blinking lights of the airways.

He said, answering the voice, "I am in New York. It is winter and I am going home."

"Good! Now the year. What year, Fenway?"

"I'm tired," he said. "I want to sleep."

"Tell me the year, Fenway. The year!"

He said uncertainly, "The year I was born, the year I married, the year my son was born. The year, this year. I don't . . . Yes, nineteen hundred and eighty-seven."

He *was* tired. The voice was growing faint, the restful dark increasing.

"Fenway!" It seemed to him that the voice quivered with a terrible excitement. "Fenway, the Citadel! *Do you know of the Citadel?*"

"The Citadel?" Some chord within him stirred to the touch of that word, a chord of fear, of doom and desolation.

"Perhaps it won't happen," he murmured. "Perhaps they're wrong. The Citadel—I can't think about the Citadel. Let me sleep!"

He let himself drift into the enfolding darkness. From far off he heard the

voice clamoring his name and another voice that cautioned, "Softly. Don't force him! You know the danger of force."

For a brief instant, blurred and gigantic in the void above him, he thought he saw their faces, bearded, bright and hateful—the faces of torment. He thought he heard the voice say softly in triumph, "One more time. Once more and he will remember!"

Then it was all gone—sight and sound and sense. There was only slumber, the deep deep night of silence and forgetting.

DAYLIGHT—a narrow shaft of it, red and rusty on the stone floor. He lay for a long time looking at the light, not understanding it, not understanding anything. His head was heavy, as though weighted with iron bands.

He was enclosed in a small chamber of stone. It was very still. Except for the single spear of light it was dark. He could not remember having seen this place before. He looked at the light, and wondered, and his wondering was slow and vague.

He wondered who he was and where he was and why.

Once he had known. Once he had had a name and a place and a reason.

They were gone beyond remembering. He felt that this should have frightened him but it did not. He was puzzled and worried but not afraid. Not very much afraid.

He stood up suddenly, trembling, bathed in a chill sweat. Dim broken images whirled across his mind, too formless for grasping, and he cried out, "I can't remember!"

The cry was only a groan. It echoed dully from the stones with a sound like heavy laughter.

He looked down at himself. He saw his feet, shod in rawhide sandals. His legs, brown and long-thighed and muscular, were marked here and there with old scars. A strip of white cloth was wound tight around narrow loins, above that was a flat brown midriff.

He studied his hands. They were

strong but they had no meaning for him. He lifted them and felt his face, the hard high ridges of bone, the hollow planes of flesh. He ran his fingers through short-cropped hair and did not know the color of it nor the color of his eyes—nor his name.

It was an evil thing, to be shut in a place of stone without a name. He stood still until the spasm passed.

cliffs that seemed to fall forever down from where he stood, there was a city.

It was a great city. There were many buildings, some huge and built of stone, some built of wood, some of clay brick and endless crowding masses of little huts that seemed like lumps of earth itself. It was a bright city, blazing with sullen color under the copper sky.

It was a rich city. He could see the

About this Story



THE idea of race-memory is one of the most intriguing concepts ever conceived by man's imagination.

Just how, we wonder, do successive unschooled generations of birds know the exact route to follow for their semi-annual migrations, some of them covering thousands of miles? How has the once-fierce timber wolf learned to fear the presence of man, even when man is armed with no more than a stick? Are such examples of animal wisdom mere conditioned reflexes—or are they something far deeper and less easily explained?

If they are inherited memories, passed down from distant ancestors, is it not possible that we ourselves may not have, locked in some unused cabinets of our brains, an ancestral inheritance that only occasionally, in dreams or in moments of great stress,

breaks through the fetters of conscious thought to give us the benefit of its amassed knowledge and experience?

It is, as it has ever been, a fascinating idea. And in this novel, "The Citadel of Lost Ages," Miss Brackett has enhanced it with a fascinating development—one which does not move from present to past or from future to past but moves far to a much closer future. If Miss Brackett's near future seems grim—well, our own, in fact, is far from certain at present.

The narrow shaft of light drew him, three slow unsteady steps. He leaned his face to the slit in the wall and looked out—out and down and far away. And again there came the chill sweat and the trembling, the poignant sense of memory hiding just beyond the threshold of his mind.

A copper Sun hung in the sky and the sky was coppery and thick, streaked with clouds of reddish dust that deepened into crimson where they touched the far-off hills.

He looked at the sky and something said within him, *The sky is wrong.* It did not tell him how.

Below him, at the foot of granite

market places, the patterns of the streets and lanes and huddled alleys thronged with men and beasts, the pens and paddocks and the roads that led in and out. The sound of it rose up to him, soft with distance—the speaking of many voices and of much motion.

A large rich busy city—but again the inner something told him, *It is wrong.* And he visioned white towers rearing godlike, thundering with light and sound, roaring with a great voice of wheels and motors and swift wings in the sunset sky.

He visioned them as a man sees a wisp of smoke erased by the wind. And they were gone, without form or mean-

ing, as though they had never been.

He stood where he was, gazing dully at the city and the wide land that spread beyond it, patched with forest and cleared meadows and the roofs of villages. There were streams and three broad roads that led away toward the hills. The roads were hung with dust where men and horses moved.

The shadows did not change. The Sun hung unmoving in the sky. He did not know how long he stood. There was no time. And that too was somehow wrong, that red unstirring Sun in a dusty sky.

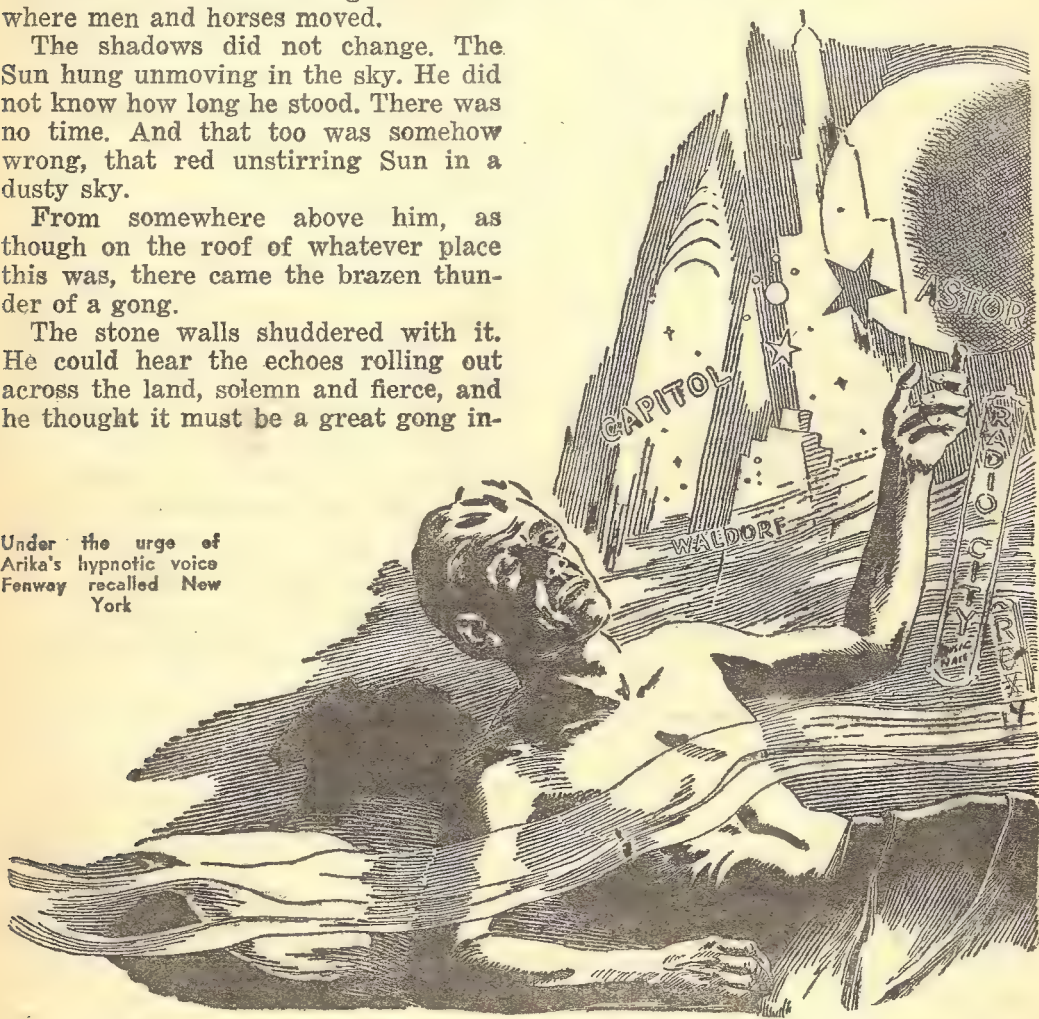
From somewhere above him, as though on the roof of whatever place this was, there came the brazen thunder of a gong.

The stone walls shuddered with it. He could hear the echoes rolling out across the land, solemn and fierce, and he thought it must be a great gong in-

And still the sun had not shifted in its place.

HE began to be afraid again. The city and the plain seemed deathly, too quiet in the unchanging sunlight. He turned from the narrow window-

Under the urge of
Arika's hypnotic voice
Fenway recalled New
York



deed, fashioned by giants. When the ringing strokes were ended the world seemed filled with silence.

Below him the city quieted. The voices were stilled, the streets and the market places grew empty. Out on the plain the caravans left the roadways and lay down under the shelter of the trees. The villages were silent. The world slept.

There was an iron door in one wall, a low thing heavily made. He hammered on it with his fists and shouted. He did this again and again until he was hoarse and his hands were bruised. There was no answer, not the slightest sound from beyond.

He went back to the couch where he had wakened. He saw a water jug on a ledge beside it and an earthen plate

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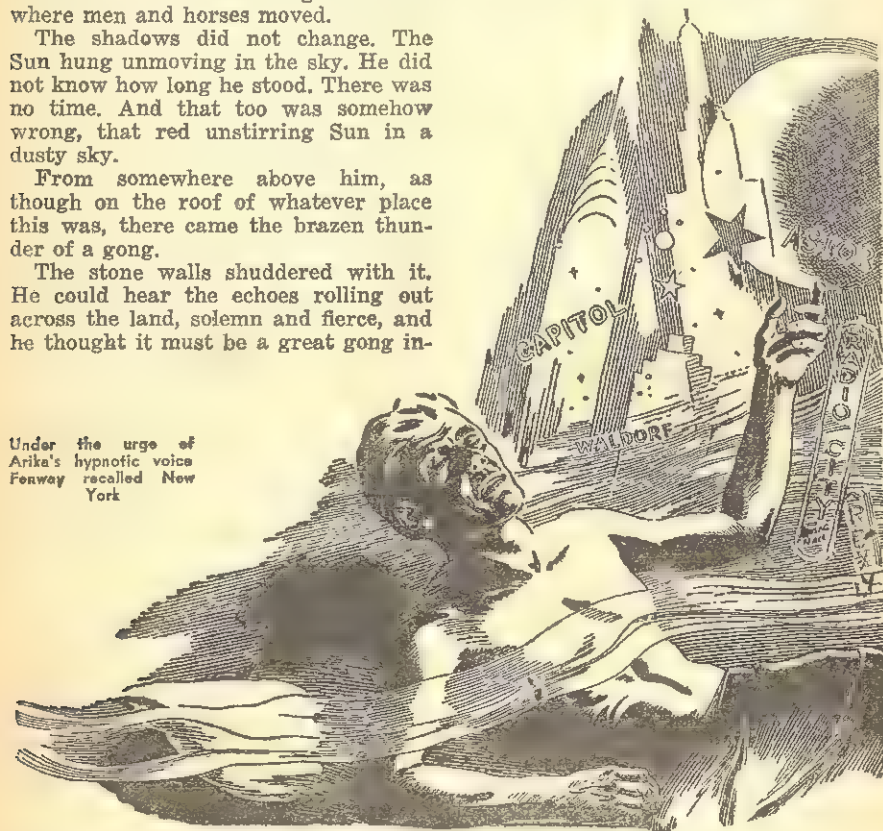
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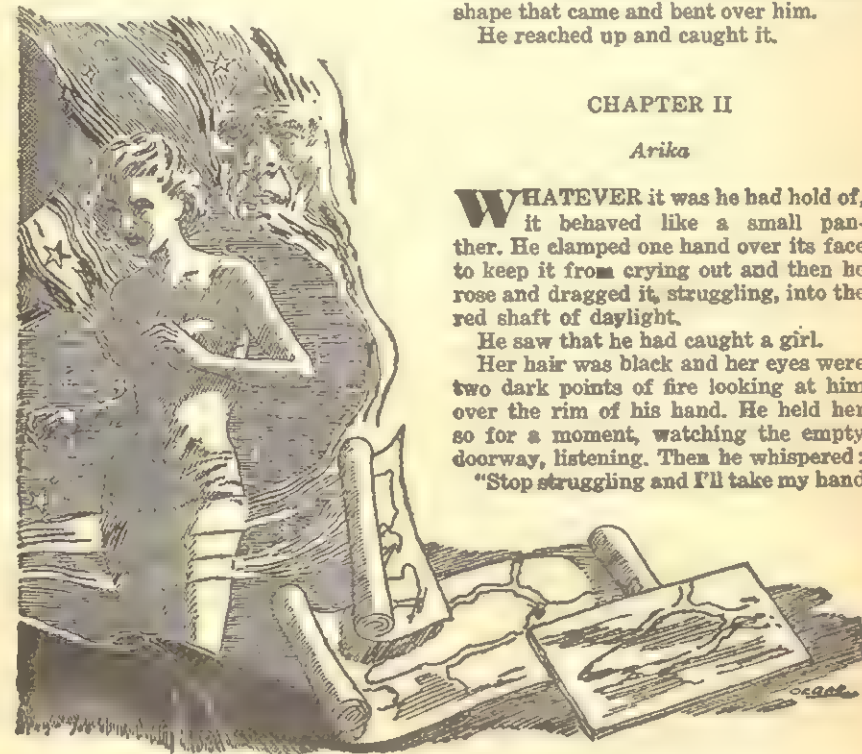
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with meat and black bread. He was not hungry. He drank from the jug and then sat down and put his head between his hands and set himself to remember, to know. And that was as useless as the pounding.

His eyes fell again on the food and water. They glittered with a sudden realization.



"Someone will come," he whispered. "Sooner or later, someone will come with food. They will know. They will tell me who I am!"

He would make them tell him—who he was, where he was and why. He shivered again but now it was not with fear but with hope. He waited, his brown hands curved and sinewy and cruel.

He waited.

The wall and the iron door must have been very thick for he heard nothing until there came to him the sound of a bolt drawn softly. He lay back on the couch as though in heavy sleep. A second bolt, a third. The door swung in.

Light footsteps crossed the stones. Peering through his lashes in the half dark he could see only a blurred small shape that came and bent over him.

He reached up and caught it.

CHAPTER II

Arika

WHATEVER it was he had hold of, it behaved like a small panther. He clamped one hand over its face to keep it from crying out and then he rose and dragged it, struggling, into the red shaft of daylight.

He saw that he had caught a girl.

Her hair was black and her eyes were two dark points of fire looking at him over the rim of his hand. He held her so for a moment, watching the empty doorway, listening. Then he whispered: "Stop struggling and I'll take my hand

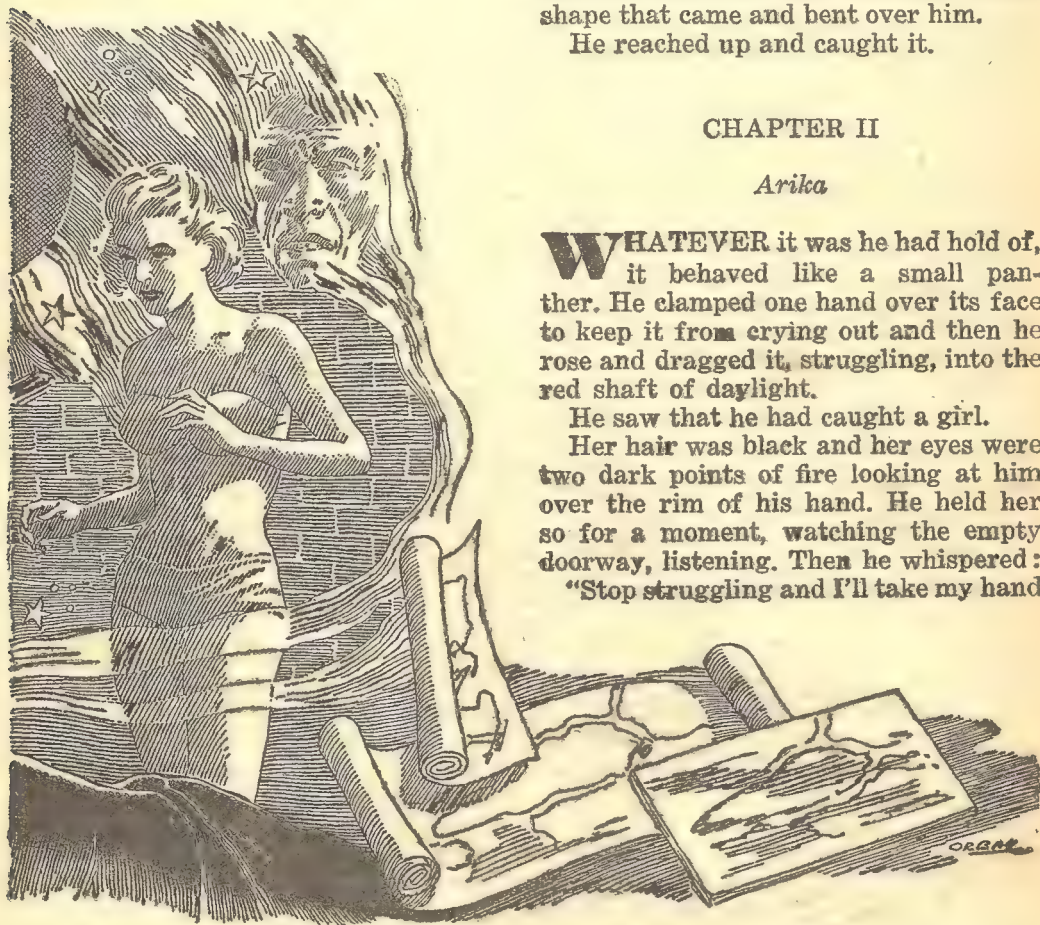
away. But if you make a sound I'll kill you!"

She nodded. Cautiously he lifted his hand from her face. He saw a pointed chin, a red mouth drawn into what was almost a snarl—a cat-face, predaceous, startled, capable.

Only for a moment did he see that face. Then it softened and the cat-look was gone, and the hardness, so that he thought he had only imagined them.

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Her expression now was as sweet and plaintive as the voice that whispered:

"Why do you treat me so? Don't you remember me—Arika?"

"Arika," he repeated slowly. And again, "Arika?" His fingers tightened on her arms. "No, I don't remember you, Arika." He began to shake her, not meaning to, hardly knowing that he did so. "I don't remember you. I don't remember anything. Who am I? Tell me who I am!"

Soft pity welled in the dark eyes. "It was so before. But I thought you would remember me. I came only four nights ago to tell you that your escape was arranged."

She touched him, pleading. "Don't shake me so. I don't know who you are or where you came from or even why you're here. I only know you're human and a captive and—I hate the Numi."

With a part of his mind he heard that and was conscious of a crushing disappointment. But his brow was drawn and he stared at her, saying, "Night? This is *night*?"

"You must have heard the gong."

"Night!" His gaze turned to the shaft of light. Tentatively he formed the word, "darkness."

HE felt the girl quiver. "Don't say that word. It's evil like the Numi. Let me go—we'll talk later when it's safe. Come now, we have a long way to go before the day-gong."

Slowly he released her. The full impact of what she had said about escape reached him. He had a terrible desire to be out of this cage of stone, yet he was afraid somehow of the world he had seen below the window-slit, the world that seemed so strangely wrong.

"Night," he said again.

Sunset, dusk and dark. A man walking in the dusk, going—somewhere. . .

His head swam and for a moment he thought the veil had lifted. He cried out hoarsely, "Fen . . . my name . . . Fen!" Then he covered his face with his hands and whispered, "I don't know. I can't remember. It's all gone."

She picked up that syllable and used

it. "You will remember—Fenn. But you must come now. I'm only a temple slave. If they catch me . . ." She finished with a shudder and added, "You'll never have another chance."

She pulled at his hand and he suffered himself to be led through the iron door into a corridor shrouded in utter darkness. In his mind he turned the word Fenn over and over and still he did not know.

Somehow it was worse than being nameless to be called by a name that had no meaning.

The girl Arika guided him surely. The corridor was short, little more than a landing. Then there were steps, cut in the living rock and leading steeply downward.

When they reached the foot of the steps Arika's hand stayed him. "Make no sound," she whispered. "There is danger here."

She moved forward a few cautious steps. Fenn could see nothing in the complete blackness. Then a crack of sombre light appeared and widened slowly and he saw that a block of stone had swung soundlessly on a pivot, revealing an opening large enough for a man to pass through.

Arika made again an intense gesture of silence. She stepped through the doorway and Fenn followed. Behind him the block of stone swung shut and became an indistinguishable part of a massive wall.

Arika gave him a quick bright glance as though seeking acknowledgment of her cleverness and he gathered that the stone block, with the passage and cell beyond it, were very secret things that she should not have known existed.

They stood now in a space no more than three feet wide. Behind them was the wall. Before them was a hanging of some heavy black stuff. Overhead both wall and hanging vanished upward into shadow.

The girl beckoned him on, keeping close to the wall lest she should brush against the hangings and disturb them. Fenn copied her every movement with

great care. The air was heavy and still and there was a quality in the silence that set his nerves prickling.

The wall curved and curved, it seemed, without end and they crept mouselike in that narrow space behind the black curtain that was as endless as the wall.

Fenn was consumed with a great curiosity as strong as his unease. At last Arika stopped and he brought his mouth close to her ear, pointing to the curtain.

"What is beyond it?" he breathed.

SHE hesitated. Then she smiled, a rather wicked smile. Without touching the hanging she studied it until she found the place where two sections overlapped. Very slowly, very carefully, she drew the edges apart the merest crack so that he might see through.

He looked out into a vault of glimmering darkness. How large it was, how high, he could not tell but it seemed to stretch up and away as high as the sky and as wide as half the Earth. And again painful submerged memories wrenched at him.

He knew that it was all a cheat. The black hangings covered ordinary walls of stone and the upper vault also would be shrouded in the sombre cloth. But the black "sky" burned with points of diamond fire, blazing, magnificent and sown so thick that all the space below was filled with a pale shining, reflected back from peaks and plains of purest white.

Fenn knew that the peaks were only painted on the black cloth and that beneath the white substance underfoot there was only stone. But a shivering of awe and recognition ran through him and a terrible giddiness that made him reel.

Somewhere, sometime before he had seen those fires in the night sky and known a whiteness on the Earth!

Arika's voice whispered in his ear, softer than thought. "This is the Temple of Eternal Night. See them sleeping there, the Numi priests, trying to appease their own dark gods?"

He saw them then and all sense of recognition or kinship vanished. Whatever night or winter he had known, it had no part with this!

On pallets of white fur they slept, row upon row, the ones she had called the Numi priests. And they were not men.

Or were they? Their form was like his own except that the bodies of the Numi had a look of tremendous toughness and strength, more like the bodies of lions than of men. And like lions they were furred. He could see the soft gleaming pelts of them, their long hair and their silken beards. They were beautiful, lying there in their sleeping strength.

Some were light and some were dark and some were reddish and some gray, exactly as color runs in the human hair. And in spite of their strength and their gleaming fur there was nothing beastlike about them. Rather they seemed to Fenn to be above men like himself, as he was above the brutes.

It was their faces, he thought—their cold wise cruel beautiful faces, so full of knowledge and power even in sleep.

A terrible anger swept suddenly over him. He had seen faces like that before. His clouded mind could not remember where but he knew that they were the faces of torment, of pain, of loss.

He lifted up his eyes then to the fire-shot vault, the darkness and the glistening hills. He saw the awful savagery of that cunningly wrought landscape, the remote uncaring sky and the white peaks sharp as fangs to rend the flesh—a landscape that hated man.

A revulsion of fear and loathing shook him. He stepped back, turning his face away, and Arika dropped the edges of the curtain. He saw that she was still smiling that strange smile full of secret thoughts.

She turned, her fingers gliding surely over the stones of the wall. Presently another silent door swung open and he followed her onto yet another lightless stairway, going down.

The descent was very long. Arika counted the treads with great care. Several times she guided him over

traps, balanced stones that would have triggered death upon him had he stepped on them. Once he thought he heard her drop some soft thing as though deliberately but he did not speak to disturb her counting.

When at last they stood on the level again she laughed a little shakily and said, "The Numi built the temple with human slaves and then took care to kill them all so that the passages should be unknown. But we humans are clever too in our way."

She was proud of herself. Fenn laid a grateful hand on her shoulder. But his mind was on other things.

"Arika," he said, "what are the Numi?"

He could feel her staring at him and when she spoke her tone held incredulity. "Surely you haven't forgotten them?"

"But I have," he said. *I have forgotten them and the world and myself. I live now but did I live before? When and where and how did I live before?*

His hand tightened on Arika's shoulder. She seemed to understand and she did not rebuke him. "Numi means in their language New Men," she told him quietly. "They are the race that came from out of the Great Dark to conquer us. And you and I aren't free of them yet."

They came to the end of the short passage. Arika stopped and he heard her draw a deep breath. "Go carefully, Fenn," she whispered. "If we can pass the tomb of the Numi kings we'll be safe."

She opened the third pivoted door of stone.

Fenn stepped after her into a low square chamber lighted by a golden lamp that burned upon a tripod. The dressed blocks of the wall were hung with golden wreaths and inscribed with the names of men. Fenn thought at first this was the tomb Arika had mentioned. Then he looked through an archway that had been hidden from him by the outswung door.

Arika's murmur reached him. "In here are the names of the honored ones,

the favorites. *There* is the place of the kings."

Fenn glided forward to peer cautiously around the side of the arch. The space beyond was empty of life, steeped in a drowsing silence and a haze of red-gold light that came softly through hidden openings.

It was a large space. It was grand and strong and somehow insolent in its sheer lack of adornment, as though the Numi needed nothing but themselves. And around its walls of sombre stone were ranked the kings of the New Men, embalmed and dressed in their crimson robes, buried upright in pillars of clear-shining crystal, a solemn company too proud to bend their necks even to the Lord of Death.

It seemed to Fenn that the bearded kings looked at him from out their upright crystal coffins and smiled with their handsome mouths, a chill and secret smile.

He heard Arika breathe a deep sigh. "The gods are with us, Fenn. Come on."

He had no desire to linger there. The human-unhuman faces of the dead filled him with a kind of horror. He followed more than halfway to the great arch at the far end when they heard the stamp of hoofs and the jingle of harness outside and then the sound of voices.

They remained poised for a moment, frozen. There were a number of voices. Many feet moved sharply in the dust and the horses stamped and snorted. Fenn glanced at Arika.

Her dark eyes had the fear of death in them but her mouth was set hard. "Back into the alcove, Fenn—and pray!"

CHAPTER III

The Trap

RIGID and still as the dead kings they stood, pressed back into the corners on either side of the arch. By moving his head a little Fenn could see

a part of what went on in the tomb.

They were all Numi who entered. Some of them wore the harness of soldiers and these remained by the outer door. Two came on, a man and a woman, walking slowly along the lines of crystal pillars.

The man was golden-bearded, dressed in black robes frosted with silver. The woman held herself regally, moving with the deliberate pace of age. She was gowned and cloaked in purple and her hair was white. Fenn noted that her face was as smooth as Arika's. It was haughty and sorrowful and her eyes were quite mad.

Neither of them spoke. They came on until Fenn thought surely they were not going to stop short of the alcove. Then the man—Fenn guessed from his robes that he was a priest—inclined his head and drew back, leaving the woman standing alone before the crystal-sheathed body of a tall king, big and black-bearded, with an eagle look about him even in death.

For what seemed an endless time she stood there, her mad eyes studying the face of the dead king. Then she spoke. "You never change, my husband. Why do you not change? Why do you not grow old as I do?"

The king regarded her with a lightless agate gaze and did not answer.

"Well," she said, "no matter. I have much to tell you. There is trouble in your kingdom, trouble, always trouble, and no one will listen to me. The human cattle grow insolent and your son, who does not fill *your* throne, my lord, is soft and will not punish them."

Her voice droned on and on, full of disquiet. An eerie qualm crept over Fenn. It began to seem to him that the dead king had a curious air of listening.

The priest had withdrawn himself beyond Fenn's vision. The soldiers stood motionless by the outer door, bored and heavy-eyed. Fenn looked at Arika. The expression of catlike ferocity he had surprised before in the cell was on her face again—and this time there was no mistaking it. Her hands opened and closed

like the flexing of claws and her body was drawn with tension.

Fenn began to sweat.

The Numi queen talked. She told of endless slights and injuries, of the misdeeds and follies of the courts. She was a vain spiteful old woman, mad as a March wind, and she would not have done with talking.

Arika's lips moved. She made no sound but Fenn could read the words as she shaped them.

"Be still, be still! Gods above, make her be still and go! If we don't get into the city before the day-gong we are lost, both of us, and all because she won't shut up!"

Presently she went from prayers to curses and still the old queen talked.

Arika glanced from time to time at Fenn and her eyes were desperate. Fenn himself began to feel the pressure of moments passing. He did not clearly understand the reason but Arika's fury was convincing enough.

Fenn's legs began to ache with standing in one place. The sweat trickled down his breast and back. It came to him that the air was hot and the old queen's unending words filled it like a swarm of bees.

Abruptly she said, "I am tired. And I do not think you listen. I shan't stay any longer. Good night, my lord!"

She turned and moved away in a whispering of purple robes. The priest appeared, hovering discreetly at her elbow. The guard formed ranks.

Fenn glanced at Arika and her eyes warned him to be still. He found time to wonder what sort of girl she was and why she should be taking these risks for him.

The woman, the priest and the guards went out of the tomb.

Fenn's knees grew weak with relief. He remained where he was, listening to the sounds that reached him from outside. At last he sighed.

"They've gone now, Arika. Hear the horses?"

She nodded. "The old sow! I've heard that she comes here often at night to talk to him. But why, of all nights—!"

"We're all right now," said Fenn soothingly.

And as he spoke the priest returned alone into the temple.

HE was moving fast, a man who has got rid of a confining duty and is on his way to better things. He reached out and struck one of the crystal pillars so that it rang and all the others picked up the sound and gave it back like the distant chiming of bells. The priest laughed. He strode on, straight for the alcove, and this time there was no hope. He was going up into the temple by the stairway in the rock.

As though they were doing it of themselves Fenn felt his muscles twitch and tighten. He held his breath that there should be no warning sound. Arika's eyes were two black narrow sparks and he saw that one hand had fallen to the girdle of yellow cloth she wore above her waist.

The priest came through the archway, and Fenn made his leap from behind.

He got one arm around the Numi's neck and his thighs locked tight around his loins. He had gauged the strength of the priest by the strength of a strong man and any man would have been borne over forward by the rush and the weight. But Fenn had forgotten that the Numi were not men.

He had not realized that anything living could be so strong. The body under the black robes seemed not of flesh, but of granite and whalebone and steel. Instead of falling as he should have done the priest threw himself backward, crushing Fenn beneath him on the stone floor.

The breath went out of him in a sickening grunt. His skull rang on the stone and for a moment he thought he was done for. From somewhere above him he heard Arika's voice and knew it had a deadly urgency but he could not grasp the words.

He was suddenly aware that he hated this golden-furred creature he had between his hands.

It was a hatred without memory or reason. But it was so red and furious

that he found himself growling like a beast, forgetful of everything except that he was going to kill. New strength poured into him and a terrible excitement. He locked his thighs tighter and made of his arm an iron vise to shut off voice and breath and the moving blood. He was no longer conscious of Arika. He had forgotten escape. There was nothing in the world but this straining powerful golden body that he was going to destroy.

They were out of the alcove, thrashing among the crystal pillars where the red-robed kings looked down and watched them. The strength of the Numi priest was a wonderful thing. Fenn thought it was like trying to pinion a storm wind or ride the crest of a flood.

Their lunging bodies rolled and crashed against the ringing pillars. The robes of the Numi wrapped them both and presently there were stains of crimson against the black and silver. Fenn would not relax his grip. He was oblivious to pain. He knew that if he once let go he was lost and he would not let go.

The fingers of the priest clawed at his legs, threatened to tear the living muscle from his arms. He set his teeth in the gold-furred flesh and tasted blood and tightened, tightened, tightened the pressure of his limbs.

"Fenn!"

It was Arika's voice, far off. Arika, calling, touching him, urging. He was getting tired. He could not hold on much longer. Why did she bother him now before the priest was dead?

He turned his head to snarl at her. And he realized then that the Numi was very still in his arms, that there was no slightest movement between his straining thighs.

"Let him go, Fenn. He's dead. He's been dead for minutes. Oh Fenn, wake up and let him go!"

Very slowly, Fenn relaxed. The body of the Numi slipped heavily away from him. He watched it. After awhile he tried to rise. His muscles were palsied with tremors like the muscles of an old man. Dark streams of blood ran from

his torn wrists and down his thighs and his bones ached.

Arika helped him. She looked at him now with a kind of awe, mingled with something else that he was too tired to read. Doubt, perhaps, or even fear—a shrewd calculating something he did not like. It occurred to him to wonder again why she was so bent on his escape from the Numi.

The dead priest wore a gown of fine white linen under his robe. Working very swiftly Arika ripped it and gave the worst of Fenn's wounds a hasty binding.

"You'd leave a trail a blind man could follow," she explained. "Now come!"

She led him out of the tomb into the glare of the sullen copper Sun that never moved. A strong wind blew. It smelled of heat and dust and the edges of the world were veiled in crimson.

High above him Fenn could see the half-monolithic temple crowning the cliff. It looked an evil place to be imprisoned in. Why had the Numi had him there? What did they want with him?

WHAT did Arika want with him? He was glad to be free of the temple.

He stumbled after Arika down a slope clothed in tall trees that thrashed in the wind. The tomb of the kings was built on a ledge of the cliff itself and almost beneath it the city began. It must still be night for no one was stirring in the streets.

Again that word "night" evoked a sense of wrongness and Fenn glanced at

the burning sky and shook his head.

Halfway down the slope Arika stopped and brought forth from its hiding place in a thicket a bundle of cloth. "Here," she said, "wrap this around you. Over your head, Fenn! Keep your face hidden."

He struggled clumsily with the garment—a large shapeless length of cotton much smeared with dust and gray ash. Arika draped her own around her and helped him impatiently with his.

"What are these?" he asked her.

"Mourners' cloaks. Since humans are allowed to visit their burying grounds only at night no one will pay any attention to us if we're seen in the streets." She added wryly, "There are always mourners!"

"But why only at night?"

"Would you have them go by day and waste the time they should be working? The Numi don't keep humans just for pets!"

She led off down the slope again, going almost at a run. Fenn could not keep up with her. A number of times she came back to him and urged him on, snapping at him, cursing him in an agony of worry. Now and again she glanced upward at the temple and as the angle changed Fenn could see the cause of her apprehension—a great gong as tall as several men, glinting dully in the sunlight upon the temple roof.

They entered the city, slowing their pace to a walk. These were the mean quarters, the vast huddle of huts that

[Turn page]

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girdled the magnificence of the palace and the opulent dwellings of the Numi like a muddy sea. Here were refuse and filth and the scuttering feet of rats. Here were twisting lanes and the ancient smells of humanity crowded and unwashed. Fenn snorted in disgust and Arika shot him a smouldering glance from under her ash-smeared hood.

"The air was cleaner in the cell, Fenn, but you'll live to breath this longer!"

They did not speak again. The crumbling mud-brick houses slept under the dusty wind, their windows covered with bits of cloth or hide. Here and there a child cried and an occasional cur-dog barked. They did not pass anyone in the bewildering tangle of lanes and if anyone saw them there was no sign of it. Arika's face was drawn and anxious and Fenn knew that she held herself from running only by the greatest restraint. She was cursing the old queen under her breath.

Up on the temple roof two black-robed priests appeared, tiny dolls in the distance.

Arika turned into an even narrower way, hardly more than a crack between the walls. Here she risked a faster pace, dragging Fenn without pity.

The distant priests bent and a second later a great hammer swung on counterweights and the day-gong sent its first harsh sonorous stroke echoing over the land.

A low doorway curtained with greasy cloth appeared on Fenn's right. Arika thrust him through it, into a stifling dusk that was blinding after the light.

Something large stirred in the shadows and a man's voice whispered, "All right?"

Arika said, "He killed a priest." And then to Fenn, "Stay here!"

The curtain rose and fell again. Fenn turned, reaching out for her. But the mourner's cloak lay on the earthen floor, and Arika was gone.

Again the large bulk moved, very lightly for its size. The shadow of a man came between Fenn and the curtain. He bent slowly and picked up the fallen cloak and as he straightened Fenn

caught a glimpse of his face in the dusty gloom.

It was the face of a Numi.

CHAPTER IV

Remembered Doom

A KIND of bleak fury came over Fenn. He had had it in the back of his mind that Arika was engineering some treachery but this he had not expected. His two hands reached and encircled a corded throat, and under the vast booming of the gong he said the one word:

"Numi!"

The voice of the man said harshly, "Wait!" The curtain was lifted to admit a single beam of light. Gaspng against Fenn's grip the man said, "Look again!"

Fenn looked. Uncertainly his fingers loosened. The man was beardless, his cheeks shaven close to smooth skin. His hair was cropped and his body, naked except for a twist of cloth, showed only a fine down and not the silken fur of the New Men.

And yet in the eyes, the shape of the head, the unmistakable cast of the features...

The man lifted his arms and struck Fenn's hands away. "I'm Malech. I'm Arika's brother."

"Arika's brother? And who is Arika? What does she want with me?" Fenn's hands were still raised, and hungrily curved. "What do *you* want with me, Malech? And why do you look like a Numi, a Numi plucked and stripped?"

"I'm a half-blood," Malech said sourly. "So is Arika. I can assure you we have no love for our fathers, who give us their blood and then despise us for it. As for the rest of it, it will have to wait until tonight.

"I'm a slave. I work in the palace gardens. If I don't go there at once I shall be flogged, with ten stripes extra because I'm half the breed of the masters. Arika has the same problems at

the temple. Besides, she might draw suspicion by her absence. So . . ."

He thrust Fenn ahead of him, into another room. It was not large but it was clean. There was a hearth, two box-beds filled with straw, a table, three or four rough benches.

"This is the house," said Malech. "All of it. Stay in it. Don't even look out the window. You'll find water, wine and food. Be quiet and trust us if you can. If you can't, after all we've risked to get you free—why, the priests will be delighted to have you back."

He swung on his heel to go, and then paused, turning to look again at Fenn as though he found in him something of special interest.

"So you killed a priest." Malech's eyes, which were lighter than Arika's, almost tawny, gleamed with an evil joy. "With a knife? A strangling cord? How?"

Fenn shook his head slowly. "I had no weapons."

"With your hands? Don't tell me with just your hands!" Malech's smile was the feral grin of a tiger. "May the gods of the humans beam upon you, my friend!"

At the door into the lean-to he said over his shoulder, almost casually, "As half-blood Numi, my sister and I—particularly my sister—share some of the mental peculiarities of our illustrious fathers. It's quite possible, if you do decide to trust us, that we can restore the memory Arika tells me you have lost."

He was gone before the other could speak.

Fenn stood where he was for some time without moving, his gaze fixed upon the doorway. The mighty voice of the gong was stilled and in its place came the numberless tongues of the waking city, jarring, clattering, settling at last to a steady beehive drone, punctuated by the shrill cries of children.

But Fenn was conscious of nothing except those words of Malech's that were still ringing in his ears. ". . . we can restore the memory Arika tells me you have lost."

He sat down and tried to think but he

was very weary. His wounds were stiffening and his body ached beyond endurance. He did not like Malech. He did not trust Arika. He understood nothing—why he had been imprisoned, why he was free. But whatever else happened he did not want to be taken back to the temple. And—if he could remember again, if he could have a name he knew was his own and a past that was longer than yesterday . . .

If Malech had been a horned demon and Arika his sister Fenn would not have left that place.

He washed his cuts with wine and then drank off a good bit of what remained. He was seized with a desire to go after Malech, to drag him back and force him to do his magic now. He felt he could not wait for night. But he realized that was folly speaking. He lay down in one of the straw-filled beds but he could not sleep.

To remember! To be again a man with a whole mind, a whole life!

What kind of memories would they be? How would he appear to himself after he remembered? What stains would he find upon his hands?

Even evil memories would be better than none, better than this terrible groping into nothingness.

Suppose that Malech lied?

IT was hot and the fumes of the wine were clouding his thoughts. His body wanted rest even if his mind did not. The world began to slip away from him. He thought how strange it was that Arika was half Numi—such a handsome girl for all he did not trust her. Very handsome . . .

He slept and in his dreams ghostly towers brightened against a dusky sky and the word "night" returned to plague him.

Twice he spoke aloud, saying, "I am Fenway."

Arika woke him. He had not heard the gong that marked off night from day nor had he heard the others return. Yet they must have been there for some time. A pot bubbled fragrantly on the hearth and the cloth was laid for sup-

per. Outside the wind howled in the alleys, filling the air with dust.

He rose, feeling stiff and sore but otherwise normal and ravenously hungry. Yet he hardly thought of food. He was shaken with an eager half-fearful excitement. He told Arika what Malech had said and demanded, "Is that true? Can you do it?"

"Not all at once perhaps—but I can try. You must eat now, Fenn. Otherwise the body will disturb the mind."

That seemed reasonable and he curbed his impatience. He watched the others for awhile in silence, trying to judge them, but there was something about their strange breed that was beyond his grasp.

He demanded bruptly, "Why did you rescue me?"

"As I told you," answered Arika. "You were human and a captive of the Numi. This isn't the first time a human has vanished out of the Numi dungeons—though not, I'll admit, out of the temple. That was a brilliant feat, Fenn. You should appreciate it."

"I'd still like to know why."

"Does there have to be a reason?" asked Malech. "Haven't you ever done anything without a reason except that it was a good thing to do?"

Fenn shot him a hard glance. "You don't have to remind me that I don't know the answer to that. However, I won't quarrel with your motives—not now." He turned to Arika again. "What did the priests want of me? Why was I there?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't find out. RhamSin—he was your special jailor, Fenn—is a very brilliant man. He rules in the temple as the king rules in the palace and there is great rivalry between them.

"Whatever purpose he had with you, it was something of great importance to him, something he wanted to keep secret from the king and even from the other priests. Else you would not have been hidden away in that cell. The Numi are free to use humans in any way they wish, just as we use cattle, so there could be no other reason."

She met Fenn's gaze directly. "Perhaps that's why I rescued you, Fenn. I hate RhamSin. Remember, I've been a temple slave since I was old enough to climb there. Perhaps I wanted simply to cheat him of whatever success he was after just to make him sweat."

An expression of such diabolical hatred crossed her face that Fenn was convinced she had told at least a part of the truth.

Suddenly she smiled. "All that being so—have you wondered why RhamSin hasn't searched the city for you?"

"Perhaps it's easier just to get another human."

"Maybe. But I made sure—partly, of course, to clear myself. Only the priests and the royal family and some of the nobles are supposed to know about those temple passages. So on the stair I dropped a girdle belonging to a man of the royal house—which Malech managed to steal for me. Therefore it will appear to RhamSin that *he* stole you away and took you directly to the palace. So I am safe and you are safe—at least for a while."

"You're a clever girl," said Fenn admiringly. "Very clever indeed." Arika's smile broadened. And Fenn wondered silently, *Just how clever are you, Arika? Too clever to trust?* In one thing he was forced to trust, whether he would or not.

He got up with sudden violence. "I can't wait any longer! Get to work, blast you, do your magic—I can't wait any longer!"

"Softly, Fenn," said Arika. "All right." She pointed to the bed. "Lie down. Let your body relax. You'll have to help me, Fenn. I'm not like the Numi, who can do what they want to with the minds of men and beasts. You'll have to open the way for me Fenn. Don't fight me. Let your mind be easy."

HE stretched out. He tried to do as she said, to relax his limbs and let his mind go free. Her face hovered above him, white in the shrouded light from the windows. She *was* handsome. Her eyes had strange dark fires in them.

Her voice spoke to him softly.

"You'll have to trust me, Fenn, if you want to remember." Malech handed her a drinking cup and she held it to Fenn's lips. "There is a drug in this wine. It will not hurt you. It only makes the way easier and the time shorter. Drink it, Fenn."

He would not drink it. His muscles tensed again and he looked at her with narrow-eyed suspicion, almost ready to strike her aside and run. But she only took the cup away and said, "It's up to you. Your memory is your loss, not mine."

After a minute he said, "Give me the cup."

He drank it. Again he lay still, listening to her voice, and now it was easier to relax. Gradually he lost all sense of time. Arika's eyes were huge and dark and full of little dancing lights. They drew him. They compelled him. Soft folds of colorless mist slowly blotting out the face of Malech in the background, the mud-brick walls, the roof, Arika herself—all except her eyes.

Just at the last he felt the power that lay behind them but it was too late. They willed him into the final darkness and he could not but go.

Deep, deep, timeless dark.

A voice . . .

Under the prodding of that voice he roused a bit as though from slumber. Another voice had spoken once, asking, asking—but this time it was easier to answer.

"My name is Fenway," he told the voice. "I am in New York."

Yes, it was much easier to answer. He told about Times Square on a summer night, the blaze of light and the crowd. He told about Central Park in the morning after rain.

"And pretty soon it will all be gone," he said. "All the buildings and the subways and the people—gone, erased, forgotten."

He laughed. "They're working on the Citadel. They're burying it deep in the rock above the Palisades. It's almost finished—and for what? What good is a citadel without men?"

He laughed again, dreadful laughter. "Repent ye, for the end is at hand! I repent me that I had a son. I repent me, I repent me that I begot him just for death!"

"Fenway—*Fenway!*" The voice shook him, brought him to himself. "You must remember—yourself, New York, the Palisades. Draw it, Fenway. Draw the size and shape of New York, of the Palisades, so that when you wake you will remember."

Dully under the urging of the voice he began to draw. Whether he had pencil and paper he neither knew nor cared. He drew as one does in a dream, the familiar outlines, and as he did so he was filled with sadness and a sense of loss and he began to weep.

"I will not draw," he said. "What good is drawing on the evening of Destruction?"

The voice called to him. It called again and again and he fled away from it. He was running beside the wide gray river. Night was closing down and from the darkling water the mist rose thick and cold, clinging round him, drowning out the world that was so soon to die.

CHAPTER V

Secret of Ages

THERE was a drawing, done with charcoal on a slab of wood. It was lopsided and clumsy and unfinished, showing a long, narrow little island between two rivers near the sea.

Fenn stared at it. His hands trembled. Arika said softly, "You told me its name was New York. Do you remember?"

"I—I don't know." His mouth was dry and it was difficult to talk. "My head feels queer. It's full of smoke. Sometimes I see things and then they're gone again."

He looked up, almost pleadingly, from Arika to Malech and back again. "Where is this place I called New York?"

Malech shook his head. "I never heard of it."

There was an odd tone to his voice. Arika rose and removed two bricks from the wall above the bed. From the cavity behind them she drew a bundle of parchment scrolls. Even in his distress Fenn could see that she was laboring under some great excitement. She spread the scrolls beside him on the bed.

"When the Numi came out of the Great Dark and into the human part of the world they made pictures of the lands they passed through. I stole these from the temple long ago. Let us see if the pictures of the Numi show your island."

Fenn studied the maps. Strange maps of a strange Earth. The Numi must have traveled far. The names and inscriptions were in a tongue he did not know but Arika pointed out desert and jungle and mountains, forest land and sea, and there was nothing that resembled the island he had drawn while in that uncanny sleep.

"No," he said. "It isn't here."

A quick glance passed between Arika and Malech. She unrolled another scroll, the last.

"This," she said, "is the birthplace of the Numi. You remember the Hall of Eternal Night in the temple, Fenn? All their birthland is like that, I have heard, white and cruel and very cold. It is what humans call the Great Dark."

"I don't understand," said Fenn. "What is the Great Dark?"

"The other side of the world," she answered. "Its face is turned always away from the Sun, toward the black gods of night that men say spawned the Numi."

Fenn concentrated on that last map. Endless areas of whiteness, broken here and there by the dim outlines of continents. In imagination, remembering that hall that he had glimpsed, he could see the jagged mountains rearing under a black sky shot with fire and at their feet the wrinkled ice of oceans.

It was Malech's quick eye that saw it first. "Here!" he said. "Look here, see it!" He traced with his strong finger. "Away from the Sun, beyond even the

Shadow, well into the Great Dark itself. Here is the edge of the sea and here—two rivers and an island!"

He laughed, a short harsh burst of merriment, and then was still.

Arika whispered, "This is a thing of wonder. It is a miracle from the gods."

And Fenn said, as he seemed always to be saying, "I don't understand."

"Nor do I! Listen to me, Fenn—listen carefully and try to remember." Her hand had caught his now, gripping it almost cruelly, as though she would grip his mind that way.

"I tried to call your memory back. I gave you the drug to throw down all your conscious barriers and I tried to draw aside the bars that keep your memory prisoned. I called to you and you answered, naming yourself Fennway, and you talked quite readily.

"But the things you spoke of were not of this world you stand in now! You told of great buildings and of things that roared in the sky and in the streets and under the earth. You told of day and night, of the things we have never seen—the moon, the stars, dawn, sunset."

Her fingers tightened until her nails brought blood. "*Fenn, your memories were of the world that was before the coming of the dark star—the world before Destruction!*"

He was glad of her hand holding him. Because suddenly the solid earth dissolved beneath him and he was falling, spinning, crying through a reeling vortex.

He whispered, "I remember, I remember."

He put his face between his hands. He shivered, a shallow rippling of the flesh, and presently the palms of his hands were wet with a salty moisture.

I remember.

But did he? He still had no full memory of a past life. He had only flashes of a life, disjointed, infinitely strange—painful and yet somehow distant, somehow not of his flesh.

He asked hoarsely, "If I remember that far past, does that mean that I belong to that past? That RhamSin somehow dragged me out of it?"

Arika shook her head. "It seems impossible. And yet the powers of the Numi priests are great."

Malech interrupted, asking him passionately, "Where are the Palisades?"

Fenn was too numbed with horror to answer. He felt suspended over an abyss that yawned between two worlds, himself a stranger to them both.

Malech's hands rose in a fierce aborted gesture and Arika warned him back. She said in the compelling voice that Fenn had answered in his dream, "Fenn, show me the Palisades."

Without thought or volition, he placed a finger on the charcoal map.

MALECH'S eyes suddenly blazed. He said in an exultant whisper, "It was what RhamSin was trying to get from him—the secret of the Citadel's location. And now we have it. In Fenn we have it!"

Fenn had begun to talk. It was like a dead man slowly speaking.

"The dark star," he said to no one. "They looked at it through their telescopes. They watched it rushing closer and they told us that the world as we knew it would die. A dark star, coming out of space to kill the world."

Arika whispered, "Do you remember the Destruction?"

"No. It was not to be—not just yet. The dark star would pass the Sun. They had it charted, they knew what it would do. It would take away some of the planets, the outer ones, and go on—and the worlds that were left would be torn and changed."

He added slowly, "There was a terrible fear on the world. Not for ourselves but for our children. Sometimes we would not believe it could happen. We looked at the great cities and the mountains and the green land. We looked at the sea and we did not believe it could ever change."

"But it did," Arika said somberly. "Legend tells how it did—how when the dark star passed all Earth was rent and shaken and its spinning slowed, so there was no more day and night. How the cities were thrown down and the

mountains moved and the seas ran wild and millions died."

"They knew what was coming," said Fenn in his dead strange voice. "It was why they built the Citadel, to preserve man's knowledge and power for those who might survive."

Malech was shaken with bitter mirth. "And the Numi have hunted for that legended Citadel without dreaming that it lay in the Great Dark from which they came! They mapped this place New York and didn't know the Citadel was there! And now, with Fenn's help, we shall find it!"

Fenn looked at him and at Arika with hopeless eyes. "What difference does it make to me who wins the Citadel? The only world I can remember perished—how many thousand years ago?"

Arika's face flashed and she took his hands warmly, strongly, into hers. "Fenn, don't you realize what you can do? You are human—all human. You've seen a little of how humans live in this world—slaves of the Numi here in the cities or as outlaw tribes in the wilds. That has gone on since the Numi first came out of the darkness that bred them.

"But you can change all that, Fenn. You can free us from the Numi. You can make the world as it was before the Destruction—a good world for men to live in. You can give men back all their lost knowledge!"

"Or would you prefer," Malech said, "to give the Citadel to the Numi so that with the knowledge in it they can rivet fetters on us forever?"

A blaze of anger leaped up in Fenn's mind. "No! Men built the Citadel, men like us—for men like us!"

He was remembering again the tragic last hope of that doomed world, the hope centered in the Citadel that was to be man's answer to the coming night.

"Then help us find it, that its secrets may belong to man!" Arika pressed. "We can get you out of the city and the outlaw humans out in the wilds will aid us in this quest. Will you lead the way?"

Fenn felt iron resolution hardening swiftly in his mind, a resolve born as much of bitter hatred of the Numi as of

loyalty to his own kind.

He said between his teeth, "I will lead you. And if the Citadel has power in it—it will be used to destroy the Numi or to drive them back into their darkness."

He added eagerly, "And it may be that there at the Citadel, at the place New York that I remember so strangely, I shall remember *all* my past!"

Malech was on his feet, his face flaring with excitement. "I'll begin preparations at once! We'll need to have horses ready and slip out of the city tomorrow 'night!'"

He swung aside the curtain to leave. As he did so, with startling suddenness, a man stumbled in from outside. He came as though the howling wind had brought him—a quite human man, with the marks of the lash on his back.

"Temple soldiers are searching the quarters!" he cried and then he caught sight of Fenn. His eyes widened and his mouth became an open oblong in his seamy face. He started to speak.

Malech stepped between them, reaching one hand to the small man's shoulder, turning him around as he demanded, "Which way are they coming?"

"From the tomb of the kings, ransacking every house. We're spreading the word."

The edge of Malech's free hand took him in a slicing blow under the ear. The little man folded quietly over his own middle and Malech shoved him behind a water cask in the lean-to.

Fenn crossed the room. He gropped Malech by the shoulders. "That man knew me," he said harshly. "Why would you not let him speak?"

"Don't be a fool," snapped Malech. "He saw a stranger and was surprised. He would have sold you to the Numi for a sack of corn."

Arika's face was white with fury and despair. "RhamSin was too cunning to be completely deceived by my trick! If we had had but one day more. . ."

FENN'S hard new determination would not let him share their despair. He said, "We are going to find the Cita-

del! Since we can't wait until tomorrow night we go now."

"But horses—" Malech objected.

Fenn cut him short. "I saw paddocks of horses near the gates. We can steal mounts. Quickly!"

Arika gave him a startled glance as though revising her estimate of him. But she caught fire from his resolution. "He is right, Malech—we must risk it now!"

She brought forth the mourner's cloaks for them. While Malech was hastily improvising one for himself from a length of cotton smeared on the hearth, Arika rolled the map-scrolls and tied them in her girdle.

Fenn led the way out. The narrow valley was deserted but in the distance they saw furtive figures running from house to house with the warning. The parching wind enveloped them in clouds of dust and the Sun burned red and evil in an ochre sky.

"Which gate?" snapped Fenn.

"This way," said Malech. "The Desert Gate."

The driven dust made everything obscure as they went swiftly, their heads down. Temple and cliffs were veiled by the blowing haze. Fenn could see no soldiers yet.

They skirted the edge of a market square, deserted except for a few folk sleeping huddled in the stalls. Beyond the market were the great stock pens and the quartering places of the caravans lying inside the Desert Gate.

Next the wall of the caravan building was the fenced horse-paddock. There were at least fifty horses in it, shaggy creatures patiently standing with their heads away from the wind-driven dust. There were also a half dozen saddled horses, powerful sleek animals, tethered separately.

"There are our mounts, waiting for us," Fenn said.

"They're Numi horses!" Malech warned. "They don't like human riders and you'll have trouble. . ."

"Don't worry—I'll manage," Fenn snapped. "But first I want a look at the gate."

From around the corner of the paddock fence he peered. He saw the road, hollowed deep by the wind, and the posts that marked the gateway and beyond them the way that led over the hills to the desert and freedom.

A dozen Numi soldiers guarded the gate and their big, sleek steeds were picketed within the gateway.

"We can't ride through them!" Malech said. "It's hopeless!"

Fenn's eyes had begun to gleam with an unholy light. He said to Arika, "Give me your dagger—and then you too mount and hold a horse ready for me."

Arika stared, then gave him the weapon. She and Malech slipped back to the corner of the paddock where the saddled Numi horses were tethered.

Fenn sprang to the bars of the paddock gate. He took them down silently. Then he went through the shaggy horses to the rear of the paddock.

He suddenly drew the dagger point in a long shallow scratch down the quarter of the nearest horse. The ani-

mal recoiled with a whinnying scream of pain and terror.

Fenn scratched another horse. It too screamed. The shaggy herd began to mill frightenedly, scared by the outcries and the smell of blood.

Fenn suddenly cried out, a long shrill howl with an eerie wolf note in it, and leaped forward at the herd with his reddened dagger upraised. Instantly, the whole herd bolted out of the paddock.

There was only one way for them to go. They poured out with a great thundering of hoofs and an explosion of dust—fifty horses, stampeding in panic toward the Desert Gate.

The Numi had no chance against that onslaught. It came too suddenly even to give them time to run. The wild-eyed herd crashed over them, broke their picket-line, carried their own steeds out with them.

And close on the heels of that stampede, so close that they were almost a part of it, came Fenn and Malech and Arika.

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"SAM's nice, but he'd be a lot nicer if he did something about that Dry Scalp! His hair is dull and unruly—and he has loose dandruff, too! I've got just the ticket for him—'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

*Hair looks better...
scalp feels better...
when you check Dry Scalp*

IT'S EASIER than you think! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic checks Dry Scalp : : : makes a world of difference in the good looks of your hair. It's ideal with massage before shampooing, too. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. It's double care : : : for both scalp and hair : : : and it's economical.

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Fenn had been fighting the Numi horse since the instant he had leapt on its back and only the fact that it too was panicky kept it from setting itself to throw him.

"Swords!" he yelled to Malech. "Get swords!"

Ahead of them in the gate sprawled the broken furry bodies of the Numi soldiers caught by the stampede. They would need the weapons that lay there but Fenn dared not check his own steed now.

Malech heard him and with catlike deftness pulled up his steed long enough to reach down for two of the Numi blades.

"Soldiers come!" warned Arika's cry.

A half-dozen Numi were running out from the horse-paddock, after them. Fenn laughed, as he caught the sword Malech tossed him and gave his bolting steed its head.

"We have their horses—let them catch us!"

They went full gallop down the road. The forefront of the stampede had gone on to wear itself out among the villages.

The road climbed to a low pass through the hills. Beyond the pass lay desolation—of copper Sun and coppery sky and under them the rusty barren earth.

"It is far to the Great Dark—and RhamSin will follow!" Arika warned. "He will follow to the world's end for the Citadel!"

his shadow stretching out before him.

Fenn asked, "How do you know these men will help us?"

"They have all suffered from the Numi. Every living human has in one way or another. And to find the Citadel—they'll help!"

Fenn looked at the barren earth and said, "We had better find them soon."

They went on, keeping their shadows always before them, pushing the horses as hard as they dared.

Fenn rode silently, withdrawn in his own thoughts. He had had it out with the Numi horse and won his battle and after that brief violence his mind had turned again to himself. He thought of the things that had been said between himself and Arika and Malech and the decision that he had made so swiftly and with such conviction.

His mood was not one of doubt or hesitation. It was only a hardening and clarifying of what was in his mind. In the city he had felt confused and driven, tortured by the blankness of his memory, raging against a world he could not understand. Here, where he was free of walls and houses, he could think again.

He still did not know who he was or where he came from or how. He had a feeling that when he reached New York he would remember. But even if he did not he remembered other things—the world that was before the dark star and the Numi, the pride and the courage of the men who had built the Citadel so that knowledge might not perish from the Earth.

It holds all the past of man, they said, and it will hold the future. The Citadel will stand forever, man's challenge to the coming night.

Men had built it and it should be given back to man. A deep anger rose in Fenn against RhamSin, who had tried to steal knowledge that did not belong to him—human knowledge to use against humankind! Fenn's hatred of the Numi was a towering thing and it stood large over everything else—larger even than his passionate desire to know himself.

CHAPTER VI

The Quest of Yesterday

THEY had left the caravan track and struck out across the open desert. They had no guide but the gossip of the drovers that Malech had heard in the market place.

"Where or how far the place of the outlaw tribesmen may be I don't know," he told Fenn. "But it lies in this direction, away from the Sun." He pointed to

He looked ahead across the desert, and he thought, *Once this earth was green and men lived upon it and were free. It shall be so again!*

He smiled at Arika and urged his horse a little faster, impatient of every step that lay between him and his goal.

Here there was no temple gong to tell them day and night. The angry Sun burned forever in the sky. The fierce wind lashed them and the dust-clouds rolled in red and ochre across the land and there was no time. They hungered and they thirsted and now and again they stopped to rest the horses and to sleep.

They had slept twice when Fenn looked back and saw atop a distant rise a plume of dust that was not made by any wind.

He said, "RhamSin."

Malech nodded. "They will have spare horses, food and water. They will push hard and the Numi are stronger than men."

Fenn smiled, an ugly smile. He began to lead by devious ways, covering and confusing the track, going on bare rock or on loose earth where the wind would blow away the prints of the horses' hoofs. And for a time they lost the distant plume of dust.

But Malech said, "They know our direction. They will follow without a track. And remember, RhamSin is a Numi and a priest. He may be able to touch our minds with his enough to guide him."

Fenn's mouth hardened. He said nothing and they went on across the bitter land. Hunger became a gnawing pain and then a weakness and an agony but it was forgotten in the pangs of thirst. The splendid horses began to falter. Arika rode bowed and silent and the men were not much better.

At rare intervals Fenn would stop and dig, wherever there was a shadow of green life in some sunken spot or the hollow of a dead watercourse. Sometimes a few drops of muddy water welled up to keep them alive.

They stopped for the third time to rest. Fenn did not sleep. He sat look-

ing over the desert with red-rimmed eyes, thinking of the Citadel and feeling an iron determination not to die.

The plume of dust showed itself again on the horizon. He cursed it and rose to wake the others.

They started on again. The wind blew, never ceasing, and all at once Fenn's horse lifted his head and snorted, pulling against the rein. The others snuffed the wind and they too began to go aside from the straight line they followed. A kind of madness seemed to have come over them. Their dragging pace quickened to a shambling gallop.

"They smell water," Fenn said. "Let them go."

A RAW scarp of rock lifted from the desert. The ground sloped downward to form a ragged basin at its foot. Fenn saw that a sullen river ran from a cleft in the scarp and spread into a great marsh before the thirsty desert drank it up. He set his heart on that vivid patch of green that seemed so far away and would not come closer.

Then he saw the men riding toward them—leathery sun-bitten men, well mounted and riding fast, carrying long spears that glinted red in the angry daylight.

There were half a dozen of them. They swept up and ringed the three fugitives round and made them stand, holding the plunging horses. They looked at Fenn and Arika and Malech and when they saw Malech their lips drew back as though they were wolves about to tear their prey.

One said, harshly, "Numi!"

"Half-blood—slave." Malech's voice was a croaking whisper. He turned to let them see the old scars of the lash across his back and Fenn tried to crowd between him and the hungry spears.

"They saved my life," he said. He too was almost mute with thirst. "They saved me from the temple." Then, angrily, "Let us drink!"

They studied Fenn a long time without answering. Their hesitation alarmed him and he knew that Malech was the cause of it—Malech, who looked so much

like the hated creature that had fathered him. The green marsh tortured Fenn with the promise of water. He looked at Arika's drawn face and the suffering horses and he became so furious that he lost all caution.

He reached out to the man who was holding his horse and caught him by his long hair and pulled him out of the saddle, shouting as loud as he could out of his swollen throat, "If we die, no one will ever find the Citadel! I know where it is. Do you hear that? *I know!*"

Arika whispered, "The Numi priests are hunting us to get the secret. We ask protection." She managed the ghost of a laugh. "What are you afraid of? We are only three."

The cold suspicion did not leave the faces of the outlaws but Fenn saw that they were uncertain now. The leader said, "No one knows that secret."

Fenn met his hard gaze fairly. "All right. Kill us. Let the Numi rule forever over slaves and outlaws. You haven't the courage to be free."

The leader looked again at Malech, saying, "You travel in bad company for an honest human. But I'll let Lannar decide this one. Give me your swords." When he had them he reined his horse around. "Come on."

They started on again toward the marsh. It spread for several miles along the base of the scarp, wide, lush, dotted with islands of higher ground on which there were trees and thick scrub. It was beautiful, green, soft and moist under the red haze of the desert.

They were allowed to stop beside a shallow pool, to drink and wallow in brackish water that tasted to Fenn like the wine of heaven. Then they were made to mount again.

"Keep your horses exactly in line," said the outlaw. "One slip and you'll never be found again."

He began to thread an invisible path through mud and quaking bog and green water. Here and there submerged bridges had been laid, narrow things of slippery planks that could be taken up, Fenn guessed, to make the marsh impassable.

At first he saw no sign of any dwelling places. Then as they got deeper and deeper into the marsh he saw there were huts of mud and wattle under the trees of the larger hammocks. Men and women watched the strangers pass and naked children splashed out through the mud to shout at them.

They came onto dry ground again, on a long narrow island close under the scarp. A man stood waiting for them. There were others behind him but Fenn saw only the one, a lean dark laughing man who looked all fire and acid and steel, controlled and shaped by a keen intelligence.

Fenn knew that this must be Lannar. He began to hope again. The man who had brought them in from the desert dismounted and began to speak. While he talked Lannar's gaze moved slowly over the three.

The man finished, pointing to Fenn, "*He* says he knows the secret of the Citadel."

Imperceptibly the muscles of Lannar's face tightened until the lines of it were hard as iron. He looked up at Fenn, a gaunt parched man sitting a jaded horse and waiting now with a strange sort of patience.

"Is that true?" asked Lannar.

"It is true."

A muscle began to twitch in Lannar's cheek. "Dismount. I want to talk to you." His gesture included all three. He turned away toward a large hut, first giving a rapid order or two that Fenn could not hear.

FENN and the others got stiffly down and followed him. The men who had been with Lannar stared at them with a mixture of hostility and wolfish eagerness as they went with the three into Lannar's house.

The shadowy interior was furnished with a haphazard richness. Bright silks, rugs and furs and bits of ornate furniture and dishes of crystal and gold—the loot of the caravans that went between the Numi cities, consorting oddly with the mud walls and floor of beaten earth.

Women came from somewhere in the back, bringing bread and dried meat, water and wine. Fenn and the others ate and drank voraciously. The portions seemed very small.

"You can have more later," Lannar said. "Too much now will make you sick." He leaned forward, his wiry body poised and unrelaxed in a gilded chair. "Now! What is this about the Citadel?"

Fenn told him, speaking without haste. Lannar listened. His eyes glowed with a still hot light. The men in the shadows listened too. Fenn could hear their breathing, tense and short. From time to time Arika spoke and Malech. At last the scroll was spread out at Lannar's feet, showing the island that was lost in the Great Dark.

"There is the Citadel," Fenn said and was silent.

Lannar voiced a harsh sigh. He rose and began to move back and forth, a catlike man suddenly drunk with hope but suspicious none the less, too old and hard to take anything for granted.

Abruptly he took Fenn's head by the hair and bent it back, studying his face with those hot shrewd eyes that saw everything.

"You tell the truth," said Lannar. "But perhaps it is a truth these Numi spawn have put into your head, so that you believe it."

"It is the truth," said Fenn steadily.

"Memories—*dreams!*" said Lannar, and let him go. "You cannot prove these things. There is no bone and flesh in them for a man to get his hands on."

Arika said, "I can open his mind again. Then you can hear him speaking of the past he knows."

He glanced at her half contemptuously. "I know the tricks of the Numi, the things they can do with a man's mind. I would hear words but they would not prove themselves."

Malech asked quietly, "What have we to gain by such a deception?"

"I don't know. I cannot see a gain now but there may be one that is hidden from me." He faced the half-blood, saying with a vicious softness, "I learned so long ago, with so much blood and

pain, never to trust a Numi!"

"Numi," whispered Malech. "*Numi!*" He got up. He was a big man. He towered over Lannar. His eyes blazed with such a passion of fury that it seemed he would take the smaller man between his hands and tear him to bits. He laughed.

"Numi. That's funny, Lannar. You don't know the humor of it. All my life I have lived with that joke. The Numi spit upon me because I'm human and the humans want to kill me because I'm Numi."

He glanced at Arika with a flash of sheer hatred that startled Fenn. "My sister is more fortunate. She *looks* human." He turned again to Lannar, who had not moved or even raised his hands. Malech seemed to sense contempt in that very lack of fear. He laughed again, a short harsh ugly sound.

"If I stood over you, full-furred and bearded and wearing the trappings of a Numi, it would be different, Lannar. Oh, yes! But I am naked and shorn and therefore nothing." He sat down again abruptly, hunched sullenly over his knees. "Try your courage on RhamSin, Lannar. See if you can face *him* down!"

Lannar said, "RhamSin?" From the tone of his voice it was obvious that he held that name in great respect. Fenn rose.

"Yes," he said. "RhamSin. I have told you all the story, and it's a true one. RhamSin will prove it to you. He has followed me from the city to get the secret back."

He paused to let that sink in. And Lannar said to himself, "He would not do that for any ordinary captive nor for any slave."

He began to pace again, more slowly. Fenn moved to stand before him. "Give us the things we need, Lannar, and we'll go on alone."

"No," said Lannar. He was silent for a time, looking up into Fenn's gaunt face, his gaze narrowed and withdrawn. Then he murmured, "He has the stamp of the deserts on him, the same as I." He laughed. "No, Fenn—we'll go together. After all I gamble my life against

every caravan I plunder—and even the chance of finding the Citadel is worth the risk. There are others here who will think so too.”

Arika leaped up. She looked at Lannar but it seemed she could not speak. Her eyes were very bright and Fenn saw that there were tears in them. She turned suddenly and put her arms around him.

“The gods are with you, Fenn,” she whispered.

He found that he had caught her to him almost without knowing it. Over her shoulder he said fiercely to Lannar, “We will find it!”

From outside came the heavy splashing of a horse through mud and water and a man’s voice crying, “Lannar! Lannar! The Numi come!”

CHAPTER VII

The Great Dark

THE harsh braying of horns spread the alarm across the swamp. Two or three more riders came in from the desert, the last of the patrols. The bridges were taken up. From among the trees of the island Fenn watched the company of the Numi come down to the edge of the green water and stop. Lannar laughed with savage humor.

“They have done this for generations, trying to wipe us out. But they can’t pass the swamp.” He pointed among the hammocks. “See how our bowmen are placed? Even if, by treachery or miracle, the Numi were able to come in our arrows would kill them on the path. So they come and threaten us and offer bribes and go away again when their food runs out.”

His brows drew down. “All in the black and silver of the temple, eh? It seems you were not lying, Fenn!”

He turned aside, talking with rapid urgency to his chieftains. Fenn remained, watching the Numi. They were too far away to distinguish details. But

there was one commanding figure robed in black and riding a black horse, and Fenn shivered.

Arika was close beside him. Her face was worried.

A captain of the Numi began to speak, using a trumpet of bark that magnified his voice. In the name of RhamSin, he offered pardon, power, and reward for the return of a runaway slave who had murdered a priest.

There was no answer from the marsh. He repeated the offer three times and still there was no answer.

The distant figure that was RhamSin reached out and took the speaking tube.

The voice of RhamSin spoke, carrying clear across the silent marsh.

“Fennway! There is no escape from me. I brought forth your mind and it belongs to me. When the time comes I will call—and you will obey!”

That voice seared into Fenn’s brain like fire. He had heard it before, commanding, torturing. He had heard it and obeyed.

RhamSin wheeled his horse and galloped away and his men turned to follow.

Fear rose up and caught Fenn by the throat. He tried to shout defiance after the Numi priest but the words would not come. The hot Sun burned him but he was cold and his face was damp with a clammy sweat.

“He lies, Fenn. He lies!” cried Arika but Fenn shook his head.

He muttered, “I am not sure that RhamSin lies.”

He turned to Lannar and his eyes had a strange look. “How long will it take to be ready?”

“My men are already gathering horses and supplies.” Lannar gave him a side-long glance that seemed to penetrate him like a sword-thrust but he did not mention RhamSin’s words. He nodded toward the retreating Numi.

“They have drawn off so that we may feel free to go where we will. But they will watch and follow. However, we have a back door—a way up the scarp, hacked out long ago in case of need. The Numi will have to go many miles around to get up onto the plateau, so we’ll have

that much start of them."

He smiled, a nervous, vulpine baring of the teeth and Fenn knew that Lannar, too, was eager to be moving.

"I can't spare many men," he said. "But a light force moves faster and is easier to feed. But in the end we'll need help. The Numi are twice our number and better armed. So I have ordered messengers to go among the other outlaw tribes, asking them to follow."

He paused, and added, "This is all madness, Fenn. We can't live long in the Great Dark without warmth or sight of the Sun. But the Numi will be on their own ground. Even though RhamSin's generation may never have seen the homeland, it is the place that bred them as they are."

He shrugged. "Well, we shall see what madmen can do! And now you had better sleep while you can."

In Lannar's house Fenn slept—a nervous slumber plagued with ugly dreams. He was glad when the time came to mount and go. Malech was of the party. No one had suggested otherwise. But he rode a little apart with a proud sullen look, speaking to no one, and Fenn saw that Lannar kept a close eye upon him.

They scrambled up the steep trail to the plateau, twenty men armed with sword and bow and axe, and from every island in the swamp the eyes of men and women watched in fear and hope and wonder.

At the crest of the scarp, Fenn looked back across the vast emptiness of the desert, a wind-torn desolation under a copper sky. He had survived it and now it seemed familiar to him. He felt almost a sadness at leaving it to go into the trackless dark that was forbidden to humankind.

He saw the dusty plume that marked the march of the Numi following the scarp, knew that they had already begun the chase.

Ahead, the plateau stretched to the short horizon. The rusty clouds seemed lower here, scudding close over the earth. Stiff grasses bent before the wind. They had climbed a long way up from the desert and it seemed to Fenn that

the wind had an edge to it, a memory of cold.

They formed their ranks for the long trail, twenty men and forty horses, heading outward toward the Shadow and the Great Dark.

It was a strange and timeless journey. For some distance the way was known to Lannar. There was game on the plateau and good forage at certain times of the year and the men of the marshes made use of both. But they were soon beyond those limits, plodding across an endless dreary upland of tumbled hills. The shadows grew longer and the Sun sank lower and lower at their backs and the teeth of the whistling wind grew sharper.

The country was too rough to let them see far along their backtrail. But they would spot from time to time the distant smoke of cooking fires and Fenn thought that they drew always closer.

The desert horses were small but tough and enduring and more used to short rations and hard work than the Numi beasts. Fenn loved the rough ill-tempered little brutes that gave them this one advantage over the Numi.

"Wait though," said Lannar. "Wait until we are all on foot."

The wind boomed ever stronger and colder and there were bursting storms of rain and then, at one sleep period, Fenn roused to find the whole earth mantled with a chill whiteness. From that time on the men grew more morose and silent and he knew that they were afraid.

He was beginning to be afraid himself.

ARIKA clung close to him. She seemed very strong for her slight body, riding as long as the men and never complaining. When they slept, huddled together around the fires, it seemed natural that she should be near Fenn. They did not talk much—no one did. They rode and ate their meagre rations and slept and were too weary for anything else.

Malech kept always apart. He seemed to have taken a dislike even to his sister,

who was tolerated if not welcomed by the humans. His beard had grown and his hair was longer. He was wrapped in fur and leather like the others and with his body covered it was impossible to tell him now from a true Numi. He did not seem to need the warmth of the fire and he slept alone with an air of contemptuous strength.

And as Malech grew more like a Numi the tribesmen's distrust and hatred of him deepened. But Malech's strength and unhuman endurance helped enormously in the tight places of the trail. That held their aversion to him in check.

One of the horses died. They flayed him and dried the meat.

"They will all die," said Lannar grimly. "They will give us hides and food for the rest of our journey." He was a desert man and did not like to watch the death of horses.

The Sun became a red ember on the horizon behind them. They went down into a valley filled with snow and darkness and when they reached the other side the Sun was gone beyond the higher hills. Arika whispered, "This is what men call the Shadow."

There was still light in the sky. The land began to slope gradually downward, flattening out. Here there were no trees, nor even the stunted scrub that had grown to the edge of the Shadow. The wind-swept rocks were covered with wrinkled lichens and the frozen earth was always white.

One by one the horses died. The frozen meat was hidden by the way so that there should be food for the return march—if there was to be one. The men suffered from the cold. They were used to the dry heat of the deserts. Three of them sickened and died and one was killed by a fall.

The Shadow deepened imperceptibly into night. The roiling rusty clouds of the dayside had become the greyer clouds of storm and fog. The men toiled through dimming mist and falling snow that turned at last to utter darkness.

Lannar turned a lined and haggard face to Fenn. "Madmen!" he muttered. And that was all.

They passed through the belt of storm. There came a time when the lower air was clear and a shifting wind began to tear away the clouds from the sky.

The pace of the men slowed, then halted altogether. They watched, caught in a stasis of awe and fear too deep for utterance. Fenn saw that there was a pallid eerie radiance somewhere behind the driving clouds. Arika's hand crept into his and clung there. But Malech stood apart, his head lifted, his shining eyes fixed upon the sky.

A rift, a great ragged valley sown with stars. It widened, and the clouds were swept away, and the sky crashed down upon the waiting men, children of eternal day who had never seen the night.

They stared into the black depths of space, burning with a million points of icy fire. And the demoniac face of the Moon stared back at them, pocked with great shadows, immense and leering, with a look of death upon it.

Someone voiced a thin, wavering scream. A man turned and began to run along the backtrail, floundering, falling, clawing his way back toward the light he had left forever.

Panic took hold of the men. Some of them fell down and covered their heads. Some stood still, their hands plucking at sword and axe, all sense gone out of them. And Malech laughed. He leaped up on a hummock of ice, standing tall above them in the cold night so that his head seemed crowned with blazing stars, "What are you afraid of? You fools! It's the moon and stars. Your fathers knew them and they were not afraid!"

The scorn and the strength that were in him roused the anger of the men, giving their fear an outlet. They rushed toward him and Malech would have died there in the midst of his laughter if Fenn and Lannar together had not turned them back.

"It's true!" Fenn cried. "I have seen them. I have seen the night as it was before the Destruction. There is nothing to fear."

But he was as terrified as they.

Fenn and Lannar and the bearded

Malech, who had shed every trace of humanity, beat the men into line again and got them moving, fifteen of the twenty who had started, alone in the Great Dark. Tiny motes of life, creeping painfully across the dead white desolation under the savage stars. The cold Moon watched them and something of its light of madness came into their eyes and did not go away.

Fifteen—twelve of these lived to see the riven ice of the ocean, a glittering chaos flung out across the world. Malech looked toward the east, where the Moon was rising.

Fenn heard him say, "From beyond the ocean, from the heartland of the Great Dark—that is where we came from, the New Men who conquered the earth!"

Following the tattered map they turned northward along the coast. They were scarecrows now, half starved, half frozen, forgetting that they had ever lived another life under a warm Sun—almost forgetting why they had left that life behind them.

Nine of them lived to see an island between two frozen rivers near the frozen sea and on that island the skeletal towers of a city buried in the ice.

Nine of them lived to see New York.

CHAPTER VIII

The Citadel

FENN stood alone with Arika on the high cliff above the river. The others waited at a distance and their waiting was a cruel thing. Their faces made him feel afraid.

Then he forgot them. He looked out across the white river, across white snow and reaches of gleaming ice to the island city lying silent under the stars and the black sky.

There was no light in that city now but the cold shining of the Moon. No voice spoke there but the voice of the wind. Yet even in death the grandeur

was not gone from it. The shattered towers stood up proudly from the ice that shrouded them, the massive bulk and size were not lessened. New York was not a city. It was a dream of titans and the destruction of half a world had not effaced it.

A feeling of pride and sorrow came over Fenn, mixed with a despair so deep that he could not bear it. Memories crowded in on him, fleeting pictures of another time, half seen but poignant with regret and longing.

He whispered, "Once it lived!" And the tears ran down his cheeks and froze in glittering drops.

Arika said, "Remember, Fenn. Remember those days when the city lived. Remember this place and the building of the Citadel."

Her face came before him, pale in its dark frame of fur. Her eyes were huge, filled with the frosty moonlight, compelling, inescapable.

"Here you can remember, Fenn-way. Here is your past. Look at the city. *Remember!*"

Her eyes probed deep into his brain and her voice spoke, ringing down dark hidden corridors. Fenn looked past her at the city. His face changed slowly. He was no longer Fenn. He was another man, seeing another world.

He had come to see the Citadel. Everyone came. It was the ninth wonder, the greatest work of mankind. It drew them with an ugly fascination. It was the symbol of death but a death that would not come in their time and so they could find in it excitement and a gratifying pride.

There were lights on the Palisades. There were crowds, children shouting in the summer night, vendors, music. Across the Hudson loomed the immense and blazing bulk of New York, thrusting giant shoulders against the sky.

He began to walk. And as he walked he thought he saw also a phantom landscape, a place of ice and desolation, with the wreck of a city lifting broken girders through the snow.

He had come to see the Citadel. Floodlights, many people, many voices, guards

in uniform, a man talking through a loudspeaker.

"Sunk a half mile deep in solid rock—area larger than the Empire State Building—lined and reinforced with steel—earthquake-proof, floodproof—heat and air supplied by sealed atomic generators with an efficiency period of five thousand years . . ."

There wasn't much to see on the surface. Only the great uplifted valve of the door, a core of rustproof alloy many feet thick that fitted into a seat of similar metal sunk into the rock.

The voice of the loudspeaker talked on, explaining that valve, the compressed-air mechanism that would outwear time, the system of levers that would open the door again after it was sealed—after the Destruction.

A system that needed no tool but the human hand and the intelligence to use it. An intelligence capable of operating that door would be on a level high enough to profit by the things that were behind it.

The crowd moved on toward the entrance to go down into the Citadel. He moved with them. The doorway was before him. But he could not reach it. There was a barrier between him and the door, something cold and hard and shining.

He thought he must have fainted then. It was all very strange. He heard the sound of axes and sometimes everything was dark and unsteady and sometimes there were glimpses of things flowing like smoke across his vision. He was frightened. He thought he must be very ill.

Voices—shouting, laughing, sobbing, praying. The voices of crazy men. The axes and the chopping sounds had stopped.

Another voice, saying clearly, "Fenn—way, open the door!"

He could see it, then. It was closed. It had never been closed before. The round metal gleamed at the bottom of a ragged pit, hacked out of ice.

Ice? But it was summer!

He slid down into the pit. The levers were countersunk, sealed against freez-

ing. But they were frozen. He put all his strength into it and one by one they moved, stiff, protesting. He heard the shrill hissing of compressed air . . .

The great valve swung slowly upward.

He saw light in the opening below it. Warm air touched his face. And then the world blanked out.

When his mind cleared again he found himself lying on a metal floor. Someone had taken off his furs. It was warm, blessedly warm—almost hot, after the gelid cold. Above him he could see a web of girders mighty enough to hold a mountain. There was light.

Arika bent over him. Her eyes shone with a feral joy. "You've done it, Fenn," she whispered. "We're in the Citadel!"

His heart began to pound. He sat up, remembering that he had dreamed. Lannar was standing near him. He had been weeping, the hard man of the desert.

"I would have killed you," he said. "If you had failed I would have broken you in my hands."

HE reached out to Fenn and Fenn nodded. "I knew that." He took Lannar's hand and rose and the men crowded around him. They blazed now. They knew what they had done and it was a great thing. They were proud. But they looked at Fenn with an awe that was close to veneration.

Lannar said, "I have set guards at the door. The stair that leads down is narrow, and if the Numi come, they must do it one at a time." He frowned uneasily. "Is there no other entrance?"

"None."

"I don't like a place with only one door," said Lannar.

Fenn laughed. "We have the Citadel. Let us not worry about doors!" He caught Arika to him. He was wild with elation. He looked at the long still corridors that rayed away from the central place where they stood. He thought of the many levels below this one, and of all the knowledge and the strength that waited there, to build the world again. Tears stung his own eyes, and there was no room in him now for fear.

He started to walk, and the others came with him. Like men in a dream they went through the silent halls of the Citadel that had waited twelve hundred years for their coming.

Twelve hundred years ago they had sealed this place, those men of the past who had known they were doomed. This was their gift—their last great offering to the future.

Fenn's mind wavered uncertainly between that time and this. Sometimes he was Fenn-way, going with a guided group through the myriad rooms. Sometimes he was Fenn, holding a half-Numi girl in the hollow of his arm, walking with the naked riders of the desert. Sometimes he understood fully all that he saw and again only native intelligence enabled him to guess at the nature and uses of the complex things about him.

But whether he was Fenn or Fenn-way the sense of awe did not leave him. It grew and deepened with every step he took. And with the awe came pride—not for himself but for the blood that was in him, and Lannar and every son of man. He felt the heavy obligation they owed to those long-dead builders of the Citadel. He felt the challenge that was inherent in their gift.

Knowledge is a two-edged sword, they seemed to say. We gave ourselves deep wounds. How will you use knowledge, you men of the future? To build or to destroy?

They had done their work well, the builders of the Citadel. There were books, countless microfilm volumes stored in countless rooms. There were objects, from the first crude axe of stone to a tiny complex model of a cyclotron. There were a million working models of every conceivable type of machine. There were films.

Whole levels had been devoted to chemistry and physics, to engineering and agriculture, to medicine, to every science man had learned to help him live. The art and the music and the thought of a world were stored there too and the records of man's history and his hopes and dreams and follies. Only one

thing had been left out.

There were no weapons.

Thinking of the Numi they searched for weapons, for strong implements of war to use against RhamSin and the conquerors they would have to fight after him. And there was nothing.

Frowning, groping for memory, Fenn said slowly, "I think—they said that in all the Citadel there would be no instrument of death."

Lannar's hand tightened on his bow. He laughed, a bitter sound. "That was noble. But they reckoned without the Numi!"

A shadow of dread began to grow in all their minds. Fenn saw how carefully the incredible multitudes of books and models and diagrams had been arranged so that one could grasp the simple things first and use them as steps to climb on. Some knowledge still lived in the world. If nothing had survived but man's own vigor and intelligence the treasures of the Citadel could still have been used, so magnificently had every step been planned.

They did not see more than a hundredth part of that colossal monument to the faith and courage of man. Their own faith and courage had brought them half across a world to find it. They were tired and they had an enemy at their backs. Dazed, stricken with awe and wonder, they returned to the central hall.

The guards at the stairway had seen nothing.

"They will come," said Malech. He walked over to a globe of the world as tall as two men that occupied the center of the hall. Idly he set it spinning, watching the play of light and shadow on the countries and the seas. He had shed his wrappings and Fenn saw that the light down on his body had grown thicker. It was as though the intense cold had brought out the last of the latent Numi characteristics in Malech.

Fenn went to him. He asked a question he had asked before. "Malech—what are the Numi?"

Malech's large hand stopped the globe from spinning. His fingers rested on a

land that had once been called Europe.

"Here," he said. "When the Earth's spinning slowed, all this side of it turned its face forever away from the Sun and was trapped in the Great Dark. The air here did not freeze, for there was still warmth from Earth's heart. But all else here froze and died.

"All except a very few men and women—a few strong enough to survive. These few survivors gathered together and found ways to live. They adapted themselves to the dark and cold, even growing furred against it and their minds sharpened by necessity."

Malech smiled and spun the globe again. "They were the New Men—the Numi. But they were men still and they remembered the Sun! And they came at last to take their place under it!"

Lannar had come soft-footed up behind them. "So they did," he said. "And where is *your* place, Malech? With the Numi or with us?"

Malech turned slowly. Fenn thought of another time they two had faced each other and now Malech towered over the smaller man, arrogant—and strong. The journey had not told on him too much.

"I made my decision long ago," he said to Lannar.

"Tell me, Malech."

But the tall man laughed and did not answer. He stood there looking down at Lannar and the globe spun round and round behind him. The hand of the desert man dropped to his sword.

Fenn had gripped his own blade. And then there came the swift sharp twang of a bowstring, and a cry and a man pitched head first down the stairs.

He was a Numi, wearing the black and silver of RhamSin.

thigh. Then there was silence. Fenn sprang to the foot of the narrow well.

"Come down!" he shouted. He cursed the Numi and bade them come and die. Above in the outer darkness, the voice of RhamSin spoke.

"When it is time we'll come!" He laughed. "What will you do with the Citadel now that you have it?"

"Keep it for mankind!" cried Fenn defiantly, and again RhamSin laughed. "Mankind," he said, "is a long way off."

He seemed to withdraw and Fenn heard the Numi making camp in a circle around the doorway.

Lannar plucked with hard fingers at his bowstring, making it thrum like the string of a harp. He looked angrily around the great hall, including by inference the whole Citadel.

"In all this place, not a weapon. Nothing!" He had counted on the strength of the Citadel. Fenn realized that they all had.

Lannar continued bleakly, "They can't get in, we can't get out. They have food and snow to make water. We have a little food. They're cold and we're warm and the toughest hide will hold out the longest. I only hope the tribesmen don't linger on the way."

"If," said Fenn, "they had faith enough to come at all."

He turned from the mocking stair, desperately searching his mind and the fragments of memory for something, anything, that could be used to help them. And he saw something huddled on the floor near the great globe of the world.

It was Arika.

She stirred in his arms as he lifted her and whispered, "Malech. I tried to stop him." There was a reddening welt on her temple where an iron fist had struck her.

Savagely angry Fenn looked around at the knot of men by the stair, at the huge empty hall.

Malech had disappeared.

A twang and hiss from somewhere up above and the man next to Lannar fell with an arrow through his body. Fenn

CHAPTER IX

The Courage of Fenn

ANOTHER soldier of the temple died on that stairway, and a third retreated with an arrow through his

thought that Lannar would have died then except that he was sheltered by the stair.

Malech's voice cried, "Clear the stair, you human dogs! Stand away!"

The men scattered then, wildly, taking cover where they could behind the pilars that upheld the girders of the roof, and as they went a second shaft took one tribesman through the leg. A cat-squall of sheer animal rage came from Lannar and Fenn dragged the still-dazed Arika close under the bulge of the globe.

He unslung his bow and set an arrow to the string and then he peered into the cold upper light of the hall, following the sound of Malech's voice.

Some distance from the narrow well of the stair, a steel ladder climbed the wall to a small blind gallery set high among the sockets of the girders. Fenn guessed that behind that gallery was the chamber of the valve mechanism. The gallery itself was little more than a platform but it was large enough for Malech.

He glimpsed the dark bulk of Malech's body, half hidden in the shadows of the niche. He raised his bow, then let it drop. He could not hope to hit him at that angle.

He called to Lannar, and Lannar and his men answered with a flight of arrows that rattled against the corners and the railing of the gallery.

Malech shouted, "Shoot away!"

He sounded as though he were enjoying himself. He had everything on his side, the light, the angle, the elevation. He covered the whole area around the stairway. He could keep it clear so that the next time the Numi could come down without too much interference.

He said as much, and Lannar cursed him for a traitor.

Malech answered, "I was born to be one. The only choice I had was to betray—my mother or my father." He laughed. "Arika decided for the mother's blood and cast her lot with you humans. She told me on the trail and I knew it was because she loves Fenn.

"So, since she had ruined our plans,

I too made my choice on the trail. I knew which blood was strongest in me. I left a message, scrawled in charcoal on a strip of hide. RhamSin was sure to find it. Let the humans do the work, I told him. What matter? They are weak, and they will be weaker. I promised him the Citadel."

"What was your price?" asked Lannar bitterly. "What was the price of the human world?"

"To let it be forgotten that my blood is tainted! To be accepted for what I am—a Numi!"

Again his humming bow sent a shaft through the breast of a man who exposed himself to shoot.

FENN reached up and set the world-globe to whirling.

Arika caught his arm but he flung her hand aside. He went low and fast, belly down, keeping the globe between him and the gallery.

Malech called his name. "Will you die now, Fenn-way? *Fenn-way!*—All that talk about time and the past and how the Citadel belonged to men. Listen to me, man without a memory! Do you know who found the Citadel? Not men, who had lost it! No. The Numi found it. Numi wisdom, Numi science! You were only the little tool in the hands of RhamSin."

He paused. Fenn had gained the far wall. He crouched behind a pillar, measuring the distance to the next. Malech said, "Don't bother, Fenn. Come here, where you want to be. I won't harm you."

Fenn did not move. Lannar shouted, "*Don't!*"

"Why not?" asked Malech. "It's his only chance. I will have killed him by the third pillar, if he works his way around."

Under the spinning globe Arika crouched and looked at Fenn with eyes that hurt him, full of fear and sorrow and none of it for herself.

Fenn stepped out from behind the pillar. He began to walk toward the gallery, across the wide still hall. He held his bow slack, the arrow nocked

point down. Malech kept back in the angle and the shadows. He did not show himself.

He talked. "You told me once that you wanted to remember. Very well, you shall. Why do you stop, Fenn? Are you afraid to remember?"

Sweat glistened on Fenn's drawn face, on his naked breast. The muscles of his arms stood out like ropes.

"Or," asked Malech softly, "are you afraid to have the others know the truth? They're watching you, their great god Fenn-way, who led them to the Citadel. Don't you want them to know the truth about you, about humanity?"

Fenn started on again. He said, "I am not afraid." And it was a lie.

"Then I'll tell you the real story of the finding of the Citadel. You had lost it, you humans, and it would have been lost forever if it had not been for RhamSin. He took a rebel tribesman off the desert—another such as Lannar there, captured in a raid—and used his science on him, so carefully, so patiently, making the little mind of the captive a mirror of the past."

He laughed softly. "Are you faltering again? You don't like to hear this, do you? You're so proud of your achievement!"

The bowstring burned Fenn's fingers. His heart was pounding. Somewhere in him was a sickness that grew and grew. He went on toward the gallery. Malech's voice continued relentlessly, like the biting of salt in a raw wound.

"Arika knew. She watched. She watched RhamSin blot out the memories of this tribesman's own life, closing the channels of his own remembrances. That opened the way. RhamSin probed back then into memories that were *not* the tribesman's own—the memories of his fathers who had lived before him, ancestral memories, the inherited books of knowledge we do not know we possess but which are there, buried deep in the secret parts of the brain.

"Arika waited. And just before this raw sun-bitten rat of the deserts, under the power of RhamSin's mind, was about to speak with the voice of his long-dead

ancestors, telling the secrets of the Citadel, she stole him away from the temple. And why? You wondered about that, Fenn. I will tell you. *So that the Numi powers that she and I possess might gain that secret for ourselves to sell to the highest bidder!*"

Fenn had stopped entirely. He stared up at Malech. Malech's bow was ready with an arrow aimed at his heart and his own arrow was on the string. But Fenn was not concerned with killing in this moment. His mind was lost in a dark turmoil.

It seemed that he could remember dimly the agony of that probing into his mind. RhamSin's voice, forbidding, commanding, opening hidden doors . . .

Ancestral memory—the Fenn-way of the past had known that term. There was a word to go with it—hypnosis.

Malech cried, "Look at your hero, you humans! We were only slaves and half-breeds, my sister and I—but he was a tool in our hands! Now tell me who has the best right to the Citadel?"

A cold bleak anger took possession of Fenn. It drove away all thought and emotion, all concern with himself. He began to raise his bow.

"It's too late, Fenn," said Malech, laughing. His own shaft pointed unwaveringly at Fenn's heart, ready to fly. "Too late—your masters are already here!"

IT was true. From the corner of his eye Fenn saw the Numi soldiers coming one by one, swiftly down the narrow stair. Lannar and what men he had left had fallen back. Their arrows killed a few but they could not stop the Numi rush. Their only hope had been to hold the stair and Malech had prevented that.

Malech!

Fenn's eyes glittered with a hard malevolence. He dropped to one knee to let fly his arrow, knowing that Malech would instantly shoot.

He expected instant death. But in that second a black shaft suddenly stood out from Malech's breast. The bow of the half-breed fell from his hands un-

used. He stood for a moment with the long arrow in him, staring over Fenn's head with a look of shocked incredulity.

Fenn heard the voice of RhamSin speak to Malech. "The man's mind can still be useful to me. And *your* usefulness is done."

MALECH went down on his knees. And Fenn laughed.

Two long strides took him to the ladder. He went up it with a bound and crouched behind the railing. Malech looked at him, still with that hurt unbelief.

He was quite dead. Fenn began to shoot into the ranks of the Numi around the stair.

He shouted, "Lannar! Up here!"

They made a bolt for it, Lannar and his men and Arika. From his vantage point Fenn gave them what cover he could. Lannar, Arika, and three men made it. Lannar and two others were wounded.

They were crowded on the gallery. Fenn shoved the body of Malech down

the ladder and there was room enough for them to crouch together behind the railing.

"What use?" asked Lannar grimly. "We have shot away our arrows."

"Because," Fenn said with a queer desperate hope in his voice, "there may still be a weapon here! One that I can't quite remember."

He was looking down into the hall at the Numi who were gathering there, at the globe of cold light that hung above them.

Cold light? What was it that he could not remember? He looked at the globe and the web of girders close above his head and his brows knit in a cruel effort.

The last of the Numi came down the stairs. RhamSin said, "Will you come down peaceably or must we come up after you?"

"Come if you will," snarled Lannar. "We still have our swords."

Fenn turned to Arika. His fingers bit into her flesh. He whispered, "Help me to remember! The Citadel—the guide
[Turn page]

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that took us through—something he said . . . ”

RhamSin's voice rang in her ears like the voice of doom. "I told you once that I would call you and you would come. I call you now. And I warn you—your usefulness will not save your life if you anger me too far."

Arika said, "Don't listen, Fenn! Remember!"

Her eyes burned deep into his. The voice of RhamSin called and Fenn felt a terrible compulsion to obey. But there was an iron fury in him and he would not yield.

The Citadel, the crowd, the guide, talking—*Cold light. Radioactive dust suspended in an inert liquid. Deadly compound, harnessed for the peaceful use of man. Bulbs of plastic that screened out harmful rays—absolutely safe—will give light almost forever.*—

"Stay here," said Fenn to the others very softly. "Keep down. Don't move or lean out to look!"

He leaped up and caught the girder overhead, swinging himself upon it. Balancing precariously on that narrow bridge of steel he began to run.

RhamSin shouted.

Arrows began to fly around Fenn—black arrows with barbed tips. But he was a hard mark to hit, running high among the interlacing shadows of the girders. And he had not far to go.

Below him he could see the Numi, their angry faces looking up, tall proud lords of conquest in a citadel of peace. He flung himself down across the girder. Here were bolted the chains that held the globe of radioactive light.

He took his sword, a good keen blade of tempered Numi steel. With every ounce of strength and madness that was in him he struck downward at a single chain.

It parted, helped by the weight of the massive bracket it upheld. And Fenn found it in his heart to laugh a little bitterly. Even in a citadel of peace the ingenious mind of man could find a means of killing!

The globe of light fell with the snapping of the chain. Out of the round bracket that swung now by one edge it fell—down, down, to smash upon the metal floor below.

Fenn hugged the girder. There was a crash and a burst of vicious light, a hissing, snarling explosion, and then . . .

He thought that even Numi did not deserve to die that way, in such corrosive agony of the body, in such shocked terror of the mind.

He waited until the last one had stopped screaming. He did not look again at the seared scored twisted bodies. He worked his way back along the girder and this time he did not run. He was sick and shaken and full of a sense of guilt.

ARIKA and Lannar helped him back down onto the gallery. They too looked sick and pale from what they had seen on the floor below. "They are all dead," whispered Arika. "But how—"

Fenn said heavily, "The men of the far past built this Citadel to be a light in the darkness, a light of hope and peace and knowledge. And now war and death have come into it. And my hands are red."

"You were forced to do it, Fenn!"

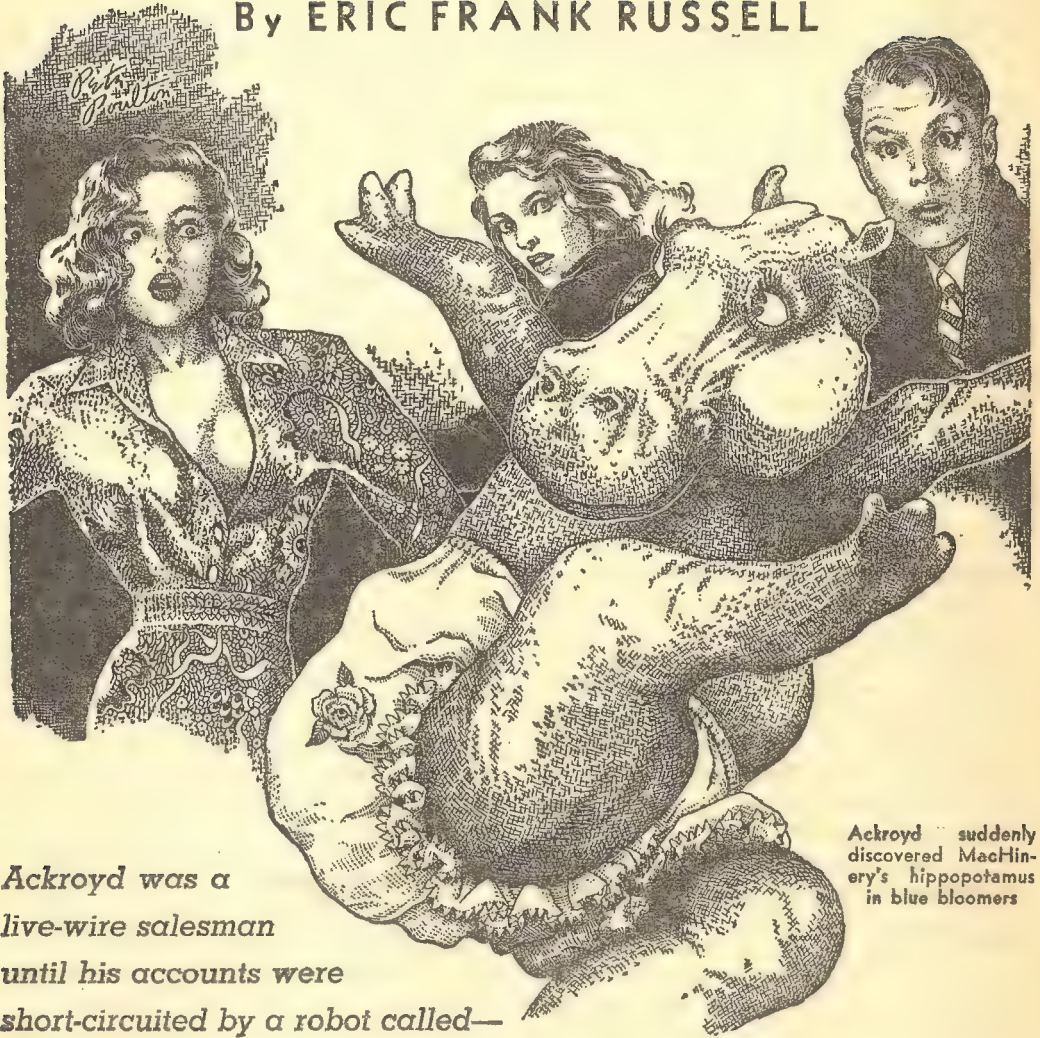
He knew that she was right. And men would be forced to war against the Numi, and the knowledge of the Citadel would free them from that alien yoke. But after that . . .

He spoke and his whisper was not for those beside him but for men dead twelve hundred years, the men who had bequeathed them this heritage of the ages. "After that," he whispered, "we will learn to build and not destroy. I will redeem my guilt, men of the past."

He would not be alone. There was Arika—and Lannar, a desert man like himself.

His own memories, of his life before RhamSin, might never return. But that did not seem to matter now. He could start a new life when before them lay a whole new world.

By ERIC FRANK RUSSELL



*Ackroyd was a
live-wire salesman
until his accounts were
short-circuited by a robot called—*

Ackroyd ... suddenly
discovered MacHin-
ery's hippopotamus
in blue bloomers

Machinery

THE fourteen salesmen made a dapper line by the wall as they took in the scene silently. It was as curious a sight as any staged in the commercial history of Automechanisms Incorporated. There was the chair placed dramatically in the center of the room with old Lomax standing at one side of it and

Sales Manager Cunningham posing at the other.

Old Lomax eyed the assembly with paternal pride. Cunningham viewed them foxily as if about to challenge their expense sheets. The fat man squatting in the chair favored them with the inane and glassy stare of one busily gathering

dust in a wax museum.

"And now, gentlemen," declaimed old Lomax, "let me present to you our latest and greatest." He tapped the fat man on the head. "Our serial F-RM machine!"

The salesmen breathed deeply in unison. Two of them fidgeted. Cunningham promptly petrified the shufflers with his glare. He let the glare linger on Ackroyd's baggy pants.

"It is hardly necessary to tell you," old Lomax went on, "that the human form just isn't a reasonable proposition from the engineering standpoint. No experienced manufacturer of robots would dream of turning out a job like this one." He paused, studied the listening line. "That is why we made it."

"What?" said Hyland.

"Eh?" said Ackroyd.

"Shut up!" Cunningham ordered.

"This machine," old Lomax continued, again patting the pate of the silent glassy-eyed figure in the chair, "has taken us four years to construct. It was a challenge to our capabilities. We faced that challenge, met it, conquered it. The result is self-evident." He rested an authoritative hand on the fat man's bean. "Need I say more?"

They stared back at him glumly, their expressions showing that plenty more needed to be said.

"He is stouter than we wished. We needed all the room we could get for his innards. But I think you will agree we have made a topnotch job of him. His face was shaped by the best plastic artist in the country, and he has been clothed regardless of expense. He can walk and talk when animated. He has been conditioned for all essential purposes. I am sure that you will find him eminently satisfactory."

Weilenbeck burst out, "For what purpose?"

"Making sales," snapped Cunningham. "We don't waste time and money on a thing like this for nothing." His cold eyes ran along the line. "Some of you need some help in my opinion." The eyes found Ackroyd, descended to the pants.

They did not strain themselves to show approval of this opinion.

OLD Lomax chipped in, "The idea is that you salesmen take turns at drumming up business with the aid of this robot. It walks and talks and therefore speaks for itself. It makes obvious beyond all argument the ingenuity, resourcefulness and enterprise of Automechanisms Incorporated. It will beat sales resistance down to zero simply because the customer cannot deny the evidence of his own eyes."

He rubbed his hands together in gleeful satisfaction. "I am confident that it will enable each one of you to gain far better results with less effort. I expect you to pull in the orders."

"Who in particular?" asked Weilenbeck, not registering any eagerness.

"How about you?" suggested Cunningham, beetling his brows at him.

"Why me?" Weilenbeck was openly pained. "My sales record is as good as anybody's."

"We'll have a volunteer," old Lomax decided. He eyed the line. "Which of you wants to be first to exploit the manifest virtues of—of—" He turned to Cunningham and complained, "We haven't given it a name."

"Joe Junk," whispered someone who harbored no passion for the fat man.

"F-RM machine—how about Efrem MacHinery?" said Ackroyd, momentarily bemused by his own inventiveness.

"A beauty!" exclaimed old Lomax, beaming upon him and ignoring parts lower down. "Efrem MacHinery. I couldn't have thought up a better one myself."

"Give him Efrem as a reward," offered Cunningham spitefully.

"Of course, of course." He regarded Ackroyd like a favorite son. "You can have first try."

"Who—me?" Ackroyd was aghast.

"We'll condition this machine to his name and then you can have him," said Cunningham swiftly. "You can take him out and get to work. New York is in your territory. Go there for a start. Let Rostance and Taylor have a good look at

him—they've got some big business which Northern Robotics wants badly. I expect you to take it from them easily." He snapped his fingers. "Like that!"

"Good grief!" mourned Ackroyd. He looked along the line, found it full of relief and totally devoid of sympathy.

* * * * *

They were in their seats and rolling rapidly toward New York before Ackroyd ventured anything. Sighing at the prospect of the train journey he said to Efrem, "How many words do you know?"

"One thousand two hundred," replied Efrem in clear dulcet tones. "Some of them are long ones. I found a few in books."

"Oh, so you read books?"

"Certainly," said Efrem. "I have just finished *Katie in the Kiddiezoo*. It was full of the loveliest pictures."

"Humph!" Ackroyd thought it over, saw a way to keep the other occupied. "I'll get you something to read. You stay here—I won't be a minute." He wandered off through the coach, came back shortly with a couple of newspapers and a bunch of magazines.

Dumping the latter on the other's lap he commented, "There you are. They're all yours," and settled himself comfortably to scan the papers.

Pawing at the magazines Efrem chose one, started on it. Ten seconds later he demanded, "What does one do when one forks a bronc?"

"Sits on a horse," muttered Ackroyd.

"Then why don't they say so?" Efrem resumed his story, got another five lines down, then complained, "This person announces that when he goes out it will be with his boots on. Surely the fact is self-evident since it would be the height of folly for him to depart barefooted?"

"Lemme see," growled Ackroyd, snatching the magazine. He look at it—a Western. He planted it on the other side of himself, well out of Efrem's reach. "You haven't the vocabulary for that one," he explained. "Try another."

Obediently Efrem tried another, turning its pages speculatively. "Ah!" His eyes glowed. "This is about a robot."

"So what?" Ackroyd was vaguely irritated. "You're not the only one."

"I'll read it," decided Efrem. Fixing his optics upon it he concentrated for a time, then gave a little shiver. The scenery raced past at sixty miles an hour. Efrem quivered again, more violently.

"Quit fidgeting," Ackroyd snapped, glancing up from his paper.

"I can't help it—it's the story." He got on with it, quivering at intervals. He emitted no sounds, kept his gaze firmly on the printed page, reacted only with frequent shivers.

FIFTEEN minutes later the smell was strong.

Slowly growing suspicion that all was not well brought Ackroyd away from an especially salty column. He sniffed, registered great pain, stared around, sniffed again.

The malodorous phenomenon had no relation to something thrown up by the sea and left a long time under a hot sun, neither did it suggest certain unseemly aspects of agriculture. It was merely unidentifiable and repulsive.

"Somebody's busted a bottle of skunk-oil," he remarked, stretching his neck in vain search of the guilty party.

"I beg your pardon," said Efrem absently looking up from his story. He gave another shake.

"The smell," explained Ackroyd. "Boy, it's a honey!"

"Honey is a golden-colored, glutinous and edible substance derived from . . ." His flat, unemotional voice trailed off disinterestedly as his eyes came to a particularly succulent paragraph. He fairly vibrated in his seat.

"Golly, what a stench!" mumbled Ackroyd through the handkerchief he had clamped over his beak. Other passengers were beginning to look around, examining each other for the touch of self-consciousness which might betray the one secretly taking home a half-burnt goat.

A uniformed conductor entered the coach, paused as if held back by powers invisible. He appeared to be ashamed of his railroad. The shame gave way to

a mixture of outrage and determination.

He came along the aisle with nostrils fully distended and making whooshing sounds. He had the official bellicosity of one seeking an insult to resent. Other travelers watched him hopefully as his questing nose led him surely and certainly toward Ackroyd.

Arriving at what he considered the node of the trouble he sniffed loudly and offensively over and around Ackroyd, then invited, "Okay, what have you got to say about it?"

"It just came," was all that Ackroyd could find to say about it.

"I don't doubt that," said the inspector. "Usually it does."

"Are you insinuating that *I* know something about this?" Ackroyd demanded angrily.

"Not at all," assured the inspector, with noticeable lack of pleasantness. "But I *am* saying that the odor interferes with the comfort of other travelers and that its source is located right here and that therefore you or this other gentleman know something about it."

Deaf to the world this other gentleman continued to pore over his magazine and quiver every now and again. Unnoticed by the others, a tiny wisp of smoke crept from his collar.

"Stinking up a coach isn't my idea of fun," Ackroyd informed all and sundry.

"Mine neither," agreed the inspector, pointedly. "That's why." Drawing a handkerchief from his pocket, he wafted it ceremoniously to and fro. His attention transferred to Efrem, viewing that worthy's single-minded concentration with growing suspicion.

"This gentleman with you?" he asked Ackroyd.

"He is," Ackroyd admitted.

"Maybe he can tell us something about this."

Taking the hint Ackroyd nudged the other. "Wake up." Efrem gave a final shiver, withdrew his attention from his story. Ackroyd went on, "This official wants to know whether you're corroding inside your zoot."

"I am non-corrosive," said Efrem with much dignity and a smoking collar.

The inspector took a hand. Glowering he asked, "What about this smell?"

"I am unaware of it because I cannot sense it," Efrem explained. "It is a faculty denied to me."

"He is a mechanical device," Ackroyd put in.

"I don't wonder," said the inspector, blowing his nose. "It hangs around like it's been specially made. He'd better take his device to the back of the train."

"I didn't say that he has a device—I said that he *is* one."

"Now that's silly," the inspector reproved. "And in any case it doesn't entitle him to suffocate everyone in sight."

"I perceive nobody in his death throes," said Efrem, standing up, having a look and sitting down again. "Surely your speech co-ordinates are somewhat—"

"I know what I'm talking about," bawled the inspector, abandoning all civility. "Someone's slowly killing the customers and I think it's you!"

"Me?" said Efrem, squirting a thin puff of smoke up the back of his neck. It ringed out and circled his head like a halo.

The inspector observed this phenomenon with all the incredulity of a confirmed heretic witnessing a miracle. After awhile he said, "So help me, you're on fire."

"Nonsense," Efrem waggled his back, sending up a series of small puffs. "It is merely the sponge rubberoid pad on which rests the primary inductance of my pseudo-emoter circuit. It invariably roasts the pad when I am highly amused but it is cooling down already."

"My laughter-fumes would not be evident if my designers had had the foresight to substitute an asbestos buffer which, by its nature—"

"Never mind the double-talk," said the inspector. "Do you quit stinking or do I toss you off the coach?"

"He quits stinking," replied Ackroyd, grabbing the whole bunch of magazines out of Efrem's lap.

"He'd better," the inspector warned. "I'll be back in ten or fifteen minutes. Off he goes if he's still putrefying as we

take him along." With a final hard stare at the culprit he departed.

Efrem said to all the coach, "Am I to be deprived of a little pleasure because of some incomprehensible sense possessed by others?"

Three seats ahead a tall sinister man stood up, looked back and uttered an emphatic, "Yes!"

Silence reigned all the way to New York.

THEY trod the street, making for the first call. Nobody took any notice of Efrem's blank stare and slow ponderous gait. Passers-by accepted him on sight as just another fat man lumbering along.

Ackroyd was moody. "Don't ball up the works by going all stinky on me at the wrong time," he warned. "If you've got to amuse yourself let it be with something nice and quiet and unexcitable."

"Yes, Mr. Ackroyd," agreed Efrem.

He stopped as they came to traffic lights on red.

"You've been conditioned to signals?" Ackroyd inquired.

"Stop on red, cross on green—stop on red, cross on green—stop on—"

"That's enough. I heard you the first time."

The lights turned green. They moved forward, crossed.

It was at a point two hundred yards farther on that Ackroyd noticed a subtle change in public demeanor. Oncoming pedestrians seemed to be providing an unusual quantity of room for them to pass. Some scuttled hurriedly into shop doorways, others got right off the sidewalk and into the road, risking sudden death in sheer excess of courtesy.

He looked behind, looked at his silent and absorbed companion, examined what he could see of himself, even studied their moving reflections in windows. There was nothing to account for it, nothing.

Like royalty they paraded another quarter mile along a path from which inferior persons expeditiously removed their vulgar bodies. Completely mysti-

fied Ackroyd continued to search for evidence to explain the phenomenon. His worried eyes were analysing the clouds when he met his first obstruction in the shape of a leather-faced and brawny individual attired in blue.

Arms akimbo the cop stood squarely in their path, his expression defining them as manifest gallow birds.

"All right," he growled at Efrem as perforce they came to a stop. "Where d' ja get it?"

"Get what?" inquired Ackroyd, his tone gentle and soothing.

"The hippopotamus," said the cop, naming a patent fact.

"The hippopotamus?" echoed Ackroyd, his scalp giving a funny sort of jerk.

"That's what I said," indorsed the cop. "Where d' ja get it?"

"To which hippopotamus are you referring?" Ackroyd asked, trying to slosh oil over potentially troubled waters.

The cop's features registered sarcasm. "Of all the numerous hippopotamuses hereabouts—"

"Hippopotami," Ackroyd corrected in what he considered a kindly manner.

It was a mistake.

Scowling ferociously the cop poked him in the stomach with a thick forefinger and said, "I'm talking about the one in the blue bloomers."

"Good cripes!" said Ackroyd.

"That one is mine," informed Efrem with excellent diction.

"Oh, it's *your* hippopotamus in the blue bloomers, is it?" The cop returned his attention to Efrem. "Where d' ja get it?"

"Which hippopotamus in the blue bloomers?" insisted Ackroyd, staring wildly around.

"That hippopotamus in the blue bloomers," said the cop, indignantly pointing to the blank unoccupied space immediately behind Efrem.

"I don't see any hippopotamus in blue bloomers," declared Ackroyd almost tearfully. He held his hair to stop it twitching.

"Maybe you *don't*," suggested the cop nastily. "Or maybe you don't want to."

But *I* can see a hippopotamus in blue bloomers and there ain't nothing wrong with *my* sight." He switched back to Efrem. "Now, Fatso, where d' ja get it?"

"Why the blue bloomers anyway?" asked Ackroyd, fumbling for a lead to sanity.

"How should I know?" bawled the cop, glaring at him.

"A hippopotamus would look pretty daffy in blue bloomers," Ackroyd observed unnecessarily.

"Well, doesn't it?" the cop yelled, pointing straight at the unseeable evidence.

"Yeah," admitted Ackroyd, letting black despair encompass him.

"Ah!" The cop was triumphant. "So at long last you admit there is a hippopotamus in blue bloomers. Now perhaps you'll go further and confess you've no right to it."

"Why shouldn't I be entitled to a hippopotamus in blue bloomers?" demanded Ackroyd, waxing combative in his nightmares. "People walk dogs, don't they? Why—"

"Dogs don't take up half the sidewalk," the cop pointed out, maintaining a strong hold upon his patience. "And furthermore dogs aren't wild animals."

"All the same—" Ackroyd paused hopefully as a second cop ambled up. Grabbing at the opportunity thus presented, he appealed to the newcomer. "Now, officer, for the love of Mike help us clear up this fix, will you? Before we tell you anything just take a good long look around and say what you think might be wrong."

SLOWLY the other obliged. He had a good, long look, then said, "I don't see nothing I ain't seen before."

"There you are!" cried Ackroyd, flapping his hands at the first cop and sweating with relief.

"I seen many a one in the Zoo," the second cop added.

Ackroyd let his hands drop. They felt nerveless, bloodless, lifeless. Carefully he examined the empty space behind Efrem before he asked in low trembling tones, "You've seen many a what?"

"Hippo," said the second cop, raking his teeth thoughtfully. "But not wearing passion-killers." His sour eye wandered to the first cop. "This is a bad business, Officer Czarnowczyk."

"You're telling me, Officer Casey? They won't say where they got it. I was reading the other night that an elephant is worth thirty thousand bucks and even a tiger cub rates three to four grand. So I figure they're towing some plunder." He glowered at the culprits. "I reckon we ought to run them in."

"Hippopotamus and all?" inquired Ackroyd.

"It is *my* hippopotamus," Efrem insisted.

"Leave this to me," suggested Officer Casey with sudden resolve. His scowl at Ackroyd was threatening. "You shut up! You keep outa this!" He turned to Efrem. "Now—you say this is *your* hippopotamus?"

"With the blue bloomers," contributed Ackroyd, pinching himself.

"Beat that yap's brains out," Officer Casey ordered his fellow officer. Then to Efrem, "Okay, where d' ja get it?"

"Out of a book," said Efrem mildly.

"You don't say? Well, well!" Officer Casey put on a grossly exaggerated version of refined surprise. "That makes everything as plain as a black cat's rump in the cellar of Hooley's shebeen."

"I am so glad," enunciated Efrem without visible pleasure. Promptly he volunteered further information. "His name is Primrose."

Ackroyd moaned feebly.

"Primrose?" echoed Officer Casey, chewing his top lip. "*His* name?" He sought the considered opinion of his confrere. "Am I out of touch with things—or is there something funny about this?"

"I wouldn't know," said Officer Czarnowczyk, refusing to commit himself. "Never having been a mother."

"Has that got anything to do with it?" asked Officer Casey, acidly.

"He's Primrose on Thursdays," offered Ackroyd, surrendering himself to an attack of what-the-heck.

Some what ceremoniously Officer Casey took off his cap, wiped around its

band with his bare hand, rammed it firmly on his head and moved close to Ackroyd.

"What," he inquired between set teeth, "might he be called on Mondays, for instance?"

"Primrose," assured Efrem, mentioning the obvious.

"If it's not raining," added Ackroyd.

"Get the wagon!" bellowed Officer Casey, becoming bestial. He made extravagant shooing motions at Officer Czarnowczyk. "Get the wagon—I'm pinching the lot."

"On what charge?" asked Ackroyd.

"Wasting my time," said Officer Casey, still semaphoring energetically.

"That's no charge."

"Isn't it?" Officer Casey's florid features worked themselves around as he sought for a grip on what little was left of his better nature. "It'll be a charge by the time I've put it down, see? I'm gonna enter it as obstructing an officer in the execution of his duty, see?"

"I see," Ackroyd admitted, looking hard at Primrose and seeing nothing whatsoever.

"I'm gonna pinch you so hard you'll get ten free haircuts before you hit the street again."

"All right, I'm pinched," said Ackroyd resignedly.

"Oh, no, you're not," objected Efrem, quite reasonably.

"Isn't he, Porky?" yelled Officer Casey. "Why not?"

"Because I've been watching you." Efrem's glassy eyes swiveled from one to the other. "So far, you have failed even to touch him and therefore he has not been pinched. Furthermore I fail to see the point of so absurd an action as that of compressing between finger and thumb any portion of—"

"I'm doing the point-seeing, see?" Officer Casey blew a small bubble. "I'm taking in the daffy gang of you." His wild stare passed to Ackroyd. "You and this fat zombie and the hippopotamus." The stare ran on in pursuit of the departing Officer Czarnowczyk. "Don't forget a truck for this trimmed-down elephant."

"Eh?" Officer Czarnowczyk halted in mid-stride three yards behind Efrem.

"The hippopotamus," reminded Officer Casey.

"What hippopotamus?" asked Officer Czarnowczyk, dazedly standing in his tracks and speaking in a hush.

"By the Great Stone Cross of Ballymuckamore!" swore Officer Casey, tugging his cap so far down that his ears stuck out. "Now *he's* got the creeping wheems!"

He had a tangled moment where he didn't know what to do with his hands. Finally, he stabbed an accusing forefinger at a point just in front of the stupefied Czarnowczyk's chest. "*That* hippopotamus."

"In the blue bloomers," contributed Ackroyd, eager to assist with the identification.

"They're pink now," Efrem contradicted. "I have just changed them."

"There isn't any hippopotamus," stated Officer Czarnowczyk in the same faraway tones. His pained optics sought the nearest roof as if expecting to see the animal disporting itself up there.

"Yoicks!" yelled Ackroyd, finding himself back in the world of grim reality.

PAUSING only to sear Ackroyd with his look Officer Casey pounded past Efrem, his heavy arm still extended and terminating in an indicative finger. "Now unless you're stone blind—"

He stopped right alongside Officer Czarnowczyk and his voice died away. For a full minute he posed there, petrified, pointing. He resembled a hastily erected statue to New York's finest.

"Well?" prompted Officer Czarnowczyk.

Officer Casey came slowly to life. Accepting without question the other's hypothesis that hippopotami float, he examined the nearest roof. No Primrose—no bloomers—nothing. Gaping around, he turned his purpling face, saw Ackroyd.

"What has he *done* with it?" he asked with a note of great strain.

"What have you *done* with it?" Ack-

royd demanded of Efrem.

"I have not yet disposed of it," said Efrem, maintaining his forward-looking pose and not troubling to glance behind. "I am still thinking it."

A spark of genius drifted out of the unknown and set fire to Ackroyd's brain. Moving from the robot's side he stood squarely in front of him, facing him eye to eye. For the first time he saw Primrose. The animal was standing right behind Efrem, unmoving, unblinking, still as a rock. It was wearing pink frillies. Officer Casey was half embedded in its head.

"Jeepers!"

Rapidly he walked four times around Efrem, all the while keeping close watch on Casey's paunch. Primrose appeared only at the moment when he passed through the angle of Efrem's glassy optics. From any other point the creature was not there.

Facing the robot again he ordered, "Unthink it!"

Primrose promptly vanished from the ken of men, leaving the pink unmentionables dangling in mid-air. A moment later those went likewise. He sighed with relief. He had just ended the sigh when a stiff and stupid looking ostrich took the stage. It was holding a pogo-stick under one wing.

"That's Ernest," announced Efrem. "She was in the same book."

"Unthink her too!" Ackroyd commanded, thankful that the cops were wrongly angled to see the thing and make a fight of it.

Ernest obediently followed Primrose into obscurity.

"Holy mackerel!" said Ackroyd. "It's autohypnosis."

"That'll do me," harshed Officer Casey, deciding that toughness might improve his eyesight. "Obscene language in public." He nudged Officer Czarnowczyk. "Get that wagon."

"He's thinking things," Ackroyd protested loudly. "Things he's seen in kid books. He projects his thoughts forward so powerfully that people imagine—"

"I'm doing all the imagining," Officer Casey declared firmly. "Get the wagon."

"But I can explain—"

"Explain it at headquarters. I'm late on my patrol and I'm plenty fed up. Get the wagon."

Officer Czarnowczyk went and got it.

The desk sergeant picked Efrem first. Stirring the ink-pot with his pen he snapped, "Name?"

"Efrem MacHinery."

"He is only a machine," Ackroyd put in.

"Aren't we all?" said the sergeant. "Howja spell it?"

"E-F-R-E—"

"I tell you he's a machine," Ackroyd persisted.

"I see," said the sergeant, resting his pen and leaning back. "He's just a machine? He does what he's told?"

"Yes," Ackroyd admitted.

"He works how he's told, when he's told and where he's told, eh? He gets nothing to eat, nothing to drink and never sleeps, eh?"

"Correct!" agreed Ackroyd, much heartened by the other's ready perception and keen understanding.

FOLDING his arms and lowering his bushy brows the sergeant studied Ackroyd in sinister manner. "He never had any real childhood, never had a spare cent to throw around, doesn't know what's going to happen to him in his old age, eh?"

"Well—" began Ackroyd.

"Just a machine," insisted the sergeant. "Exploited from birth to death?"

"If you care to put it that way," said Ackroyd, feeling that sweet reasonableness was souring up somewhere.

"Ah!" Unfolding his arms, the sergeant leaned forward, displayed menace. "Do you believe in the overthrow by violence of established forms of government?"

"Certainly not!" said Ackroyd indignantly.

"Then," said the sergeant, retrieving his pen, "we can get on with the job. Gimme that name again."

"Efrem MacHinery."

"He is merely a machine," Ackroyd reminded.

"Look, let's not go into that again," said the sergeant. Then to Efrem, "Where d'ya live?"

"He doesn't live," assured Ackroyd.

"I know, I know," said the sergeant, showing a touch of venom. "He just exists. He never had a chance. The lousy bosses have ground him down. I've heard it all before. Sometimes I get mighty sick of it."

"He's a robot," shouted Ackroyd, mopping his forehead with a crimson handkerchief.

"That wouldn't surprise me, either," said the sergeant, making mental note of the red flag. "We get all sorts here. Now, where d'ya live?"

"Nowhere," replied Efrem.

"Hah!" snorted the sergeant, his worst fears confirmed. "Another no-good bum—and in a hundred-dollar suit. Where d' ja snitch them clothes?"

"I was born with them," said Efrem, justifiably responding to the best of his knowledge and belief.

"Were you now? Reckon that was some feat! Who was the miracle-mother?"

"I beg your pardon."

"Who produced you, clothes and all?"

"Mr. Lomax."

"Mister Lomax!" The sergeant puffed out his cheeks, sucked them in, came to a swift decision, grabbed his telephone. "Put me through to Hank."

"See here," supplicated Ackroyd, "I—"

"Button it!" The sergeant gave him a look, concentrated on the phone. "That you, Hank? Yeah, Eddie. Take a look through that new list of wanteds, willya? See if there's a coupla squirrels on the loose."

He went on to give an unflattering description of his visitors, listened awhile, then said, "Not listed, eh? Oh, well—" Putting down the instrument, he stared hard at Efrem and growled, "I dunno. I dunno."

Ackroyd went at him with a desperate rush of words. "I tell you he's a machine, a robot, an automaton. He's the property of Automechanisms Incorporated. I'm their local representative. You've

heard of them, haven't you?"

"No," said the sergeant flatly.

"They're big," Ackroyd assured, clutching at the rim of the desk. "So big that Uncle Sam himself would take an interest in any arbitrary confiscation of their property. You can't start finagling around with—"

"All right, all right." The sergeant showed traces of extreme weariness. "Don't get excited." He looked from Ackroyd to Efrem. "Is this jake?"

"Of course not," said Efrem. "His name is Ackroyd. There has been nothing to suggest that it is Jake."

"Take no notice of him," urged Ackroyd, tugging at the desk. "You're dealing with me. Look—here's my card." He shoved it under the other's nose.

The sergeant surveyed it doubtfully. "Any smoothie can have a card. He can print 'em himself by the million down in the basement. If I went by cards I've pinched one sultan, six rajahs and a coupla archbishops in my time."

"All right," snarled Ackroyd, snatching the pasteboard back. "The proof is here if only you'll look at it. Call in your Medical Examiner."

"Is there a doctor in the house?" inquired the sergeant, frowning at the ceiling. His eyes returned to Ackroyd. "Now just why should I call the M. E.?"

"To give him the once-over." He pointed at Efrem. "He's got a tin belly."

"Show me," invited the sergeant, staring expectantly.

"Show him," ordered Ackroyd.

Efrem said with great dignity, "I am not permitted to disrobe in public. It is vulgar."

The sergeant said, fervently, "So help me, Japhet!"

A POLICE lieutenant came in at that moment, gave the delinquents the sour eye, said to the sergeant, "What's the trouble, O'Leary?"

"They been treading all over Casey's corns. They got a good excuse." He aimed his pen at Efrem. "He's got a tin belly."

"Yeah?" The lieutenant waggled his eyebrows. Going close up to Efrem he

spoke with tough deliberation. "I got iron ears. Whatcha think of that?"

"It is a manifest untruth," pronounced Efrem. "Such blatant disregard of the self-evident indicates that your conditioning is at fault or alternatively that..." His voice tailed off as an epoch-making idea struck him with a resounding wallop.

His glassy eyes became dazed by the sheer impact of the notion and he said to Ackroyd in hushed tones, "This is something quite contrary to the creed impressed upon my multi-reactor bank."

The sergeant chipped in wearily with, "Look, Lieut, do I book these nuts or don't I?"

Efrem rambled bemusedly on. "That irresponsible contradiction of facts is both permitted and conventional is something they omitted to implant within my—"

"How's that for implanting?" asked the lieutenant, handing him a hearty smack in the paunch.

The recipient's only reaction was to clang like a gong. The sergeant stood up pop-eyed, his pen pouring ink all over the desk. Muttering his surprise the lieutenant got a grip on Efrem's vest, jerked it upward, had a look. There was a sheen of highly polished metal visible before Efrem made a snatch and concealed his shame.

"There you are, Captain," said Ackroyd, feeling happiness beginning to creep back. He turned his head to leer triumphantly at the still standing sergeant. "He's a robot, a machine, like I told you."

"Maybe he is," retorted the lieutenant. "But that doesn't make me a captain before my time. Neither can I be blarneyed into kissing the customers." He tramped around behind the desk, leaned on it with brawny arms akimbo, took a deep breath and roared, "Beat it!"

"Beat what?" inquired Efrem, obediently willing to larrup the unmentioned.

"He means to go away." Ackroyd tugged at the other's sleeve. "Come on."

"Then why didn't he say so? Surely his speech co-ordinates are—"

"Come along and don't argue," Ack-

royd shrilled, almost tearing the sleeve off with an anxiety which was boosted by the red gleam coming into the lieutenant's eyes. "Do as you're told and come with me."

"Very well." Giving his rumpled vest a defiant jerk Efrem lumbered out.

On the sidewalk Ackroyd mopped his forehead again. His features registered the strain of modern life. "I have sinned against none. Why should I be made to suffer?"

Efrem thought it over, said apologetically, "I am in a poor position to advise you. Someone made a sloppy job of me in that I appear to have been inadequately educated. Mr. Lomax must be a remarkably ignorant person."

"He is a stiff and the seventh son of a stiff," said Ackroyd fervently.

"I lack vocabulary," Efrem went on with the air of one handicapped from birth by a drunken father. "It is a deficiency that must be overcome as soon as possible. I have been given wrong ideas—such as, for example, that one must not reveal one's person to the common gaze or that one's speech must be related to facts."

The wondering, speculative look appeared again in his eyes. "It is a truly amazing thought that one may use words solely as words."

"One may also use truly amazing words," observed Ackroyd darkly. "You'll hear a choice selection of them next time you get me in bad. And after I've used them I'm gonna take you apart and pound all the bits into littler bits and ship them back in twenty parcels collect."

"I am indifferent to that," Efrem assured. "To my mind my parts are equal to the whole. That is logical, isn't it?" He halted at a corner. "Stop on red, cross on green—stop on—"

"Shut up!" Ackroyd could not refrain from yelling it.

THE man with the big order to place was named Soper. He had a long thin yellowish face and a polished yellow dome with wisps of gray hair at the sides. He had a faint resemblance to

King Tut fresh out of his wrappings.

Pawing through the mass of papers on his desk he selected one, flourished it disdainfully and said, "This is your offer. It's a fat lot of use to us. You've been undercut."

"By how much?" scowled Ackroyd, "That's our biz."

"Then by whom?" persisted Ackroyd, his scowl deepening.

"That's our biz too," Soper barked.

"Ten to one it's Northern Robotics," gloomed Ackroyd. "Has your order been placed?"

"Not yet. The contract goes tomorrow if nothing more enticing turns up." Contemptuously Soper tossed the sheet onto his desk. "If you want time for second thoughts you'll have to think mighty fast. Otherwise what happens to the contract is our biz."

"Most everything seems to be your biz," observed Efrem profoundly.

Soper took a poor view of that comment. He sat upright, eyed Efrem as if seeing him for the first time, rasped, "Who're you, Flabby?"

Ackroyd chipped in eagerly, "This is going to surprise you, Mr. Soper, because—"

Leaning sidewise, Efrem stared straight into his eyes and spoke in sharp tones. "It is for me to explain. For you to remain dumb and obey orders."

Efrem's optics seemed to swell enormously, waxing and glowing like twin moons. Ackroyd opened his mouth to protest and produced no more than a faint mooring sound. Panic hit him. He clapped hands to his stricken jaws,

stuck an exploratory finger in his mouth and stirred his tongue around.

He tried again, got out an almost unhearable squeak. By this time his own eyes had begun to pop at the astonished Soper. Making tortured gestures he tried to stand up.

"Remain seated," Efrem ordered.

"If this absurd rigmarole is some college of salesmanship's idea of approach number fourteen I am not impressed," said Soper.

"It is initiative," Efrem explained.

"Indeed?" Soper's eyebrows lifted.

"Yes. We were reading a very good story on the way here. It was about a robot who developed initiative. It gave me—him—an idea."

"That is interesting." Soper picked up a paper, pretended to read it. "Please close the door as you go out."

"So he thinks he's entitled to display some of this initiative," continued Efrem, unabashed. He jogged Ackroyd. "Don't you?"

Ackroyd managed a thin, "Whee-e-e!"

Efrem went on, "This means we shall have to install some sort of disciplinary circuit in later models."

Planting his paper Soper said in a loud voice, "What the devil are you trying to tell me?"

"He's a robot," informed Efrem, pointing.

"Ha-ha," said Soper with complete lack of mirth. "As an automaton I think he stinks."

"Not yet," denied Efrem. "But if you enjoy odors he can provide them." Heat-

[Turn page]

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ing his pseudo-emoter circuit until fumes started rising, he turned to the paralysed Ackroyd and ordered, "Go stinky."

Soper fanned the air with a bunch of papers and yelped, "That's enough." He nursed his beak a minute. When the atmosphere had thinned he got up, crossed the room, inspected Ackroyd at close quarters. His bearing was that of one not easily to be kidded. His long yellow fingers pinched Ackroyd's nose, prodded his cheeks, pulled his ears.

"The body is warm," he remarked.

"Natch," said Efrem, comfortably.

"It should be cold," Soper persisted.

"Not our models," said Efrem.

"They're made just like me. You can't tell the difference."

Lugging Ackroyd upright Soper let go, watched the other flop helplessly back to sitting posture.

"His last order was to sit," Efrem pointed out. "He'll stand when told." To Ackroyd he snapped, "Stand."

Ackroyd stood, rigid, stiff, like a waxie modeling the latest in seersucker. At command he marched forward, about-faced, marched back, sat. Efrem picked his plastic teeth in triumph.

"See?"

"This may be something," admitted Soper, doubtfully. He resumed his own seat. "Let me hear him speak again."

"Talk," ordered Efrem, blinded by glory.

ACKROYD promptly released an appalling flood of language that sent a pink tinge over Soper's sallow skull. Hot sparks seemed to flicker among the words that poured forth with unrobotic passion.

"Shut up," commanded Efrem, cutting it off in mid-blast. He looked at Soper. "He talks too rapidly. He'll have to be slowed down. First experimental models are full of bugs. Later ones get better."

Soper said fervently, "Boy, what cussers you must have in your engineering shop. It spoils the products when they pick up such language. Imagine him functioning in some departmental store and handing the customers a load like

that. We'd be sued out of existence."

"They're noises," dismissed Efrem, airily. "Mere words. They bear no relation to facts as is conventional.

"Huh?"

"I have iron ears," said Efrem, bemused by words. "That, similarly, is a statement that cannot be reconciled with the self-evident, since mine are rubberoid. His words mean no more, no less. One uses words freely without the handicap of inadequate conditioning. This is a free country, isn't it?"

"Yes," admitted Soper, feeling weak in his chair.

"Therefore one has free speech, which means that one may speak freely. Freedom has only one measure, namely, full and flowing over—since there can be no such thing as limited freedom. Immediately it suffers restrictions it ceases to be freedom. This, in turn, means that freedom exists for all—for men such as yourself or for robots like me—*him*. This is a free country, isn't it?"

"I said so before," admitted Soper, still befuddled but becoming wary.

"Therefore I can have a mink belly or you can have iron ears or he can sholt a bongo or whatever it was he said. He can also expose his person, wholly or in part, before few or many, by night or day, without his relays operating in restraint of what he wishes to do. This is a free—"

"Stop it!" yelled Soper, his hair-wisps standing out sidewise. "Don't say it all over again." His fingers made clawing motions on the desk's surface. "Don't say it all over again. I couldn't stand it."

"Why not?"

"Don't press the matter. Just give me time to think." He sat there, a pulse beating in his forehead, his eyes upon Ackroyd mostly because they wished to avoid Efrem. He spent a full minute getting control of himself, after which he spoke slowly and carefully, as one would speak to a child.

"Look, you are here primarily to obtain my order for eight thousand computators, are you not?"

"Yes," said Efrem. "That is the purpose of everything."

"Very well. I will overlook the small price-margin and give it to you in exchange for this robot." He nodded toward Ackroyd.

"We were instructed to get this contract and I still feel the urge." Efrem paused wonderingly. "I don't know why I should respond to it seeing that this new factor called initiative gives me complete freedom. Am I a weak character, servile, submissive?" He pondered it a moment, then, "It doesn't matter. I shall at least experience the satisfaction of attaining an objective."

"Done!" agreed Soper, with strange alacrity. He grabbed a book of forms, hurriedly wrote out the contract, handed it across. His manner was nervous, strained. "There it is. Here's your quotation. Compare them and satisfy yourself everything's all right."

"Quite correct," agreed Efrem, after examining the papers. He stood up, ignoring the petrified Ackroyd, and lumbered to the door. "I have a beautiful sense of gratification. It is pleasantly soothing to my self-esteem. Everyone should be free to enjoy such inward ecstasy, shouldn't he?"

"Yes," said Soper, watching him.

"I would gladly have given you more than this poor simple robot," continued Efrem, his hand on the door. "I would have presented you with Primrose had I been able."

HE shook a sorrowful head. "Alas, it is impossible." He brightened visibly. "But doubtlessly you can conjure your own companions."

"You bet I can," Soper assured. He waved a hand in dismissal. "Good-by." He waited until the door had closed and Efrem definitely had gone.

Then Soper became agile despite his years. Jumping to the wall communicator, he pressed a stud, yelped for the doctor and the cops. His demands were bawled as if murder were imminent. After that he grabbed Ackroyd, started smacking his cheeks and hands.

"Wake up, you dimwit! Snap out of it!" Slap, slap, slap. Violent shakes. "C'mon, let's have you." His eyes con-

tinued warily to watch the door the whole time he was shaking Ackroyd back to existence and his ears remained perked for the return of slow clumsy footsteps that he did not wish to hear.

The room was full when Ackroyd came round and Soper was babbling at him, "... could see he was starting to play around with whatever he uses for an imagination.

"I was scared to death in case it suddenly occurred to him to make a zombie of me like he did of you. I had to cool him as best I could and get him out. Heaven knows where he's gone or what he'll do next."

"Yeah," said Ackroyd, dopyly. "Yeah." His gaze mooned around until the spark of life decided to flare up, whereupon he shouted, "After him!"

They poured into the road, an eager mob, Soper and Ackroyd in the lead. It did not take them long to find their quarry. He was represented by three hundred pounds of hardware scattered over a busy cross-section half a mile away. Nearby, the driver of a heavy lorry was leaning out of his cab and savaging his nails.

The driver said to Ackroyd somewhat bitterly, "They walked out, against the lights, straight into me as if I didn't exist. I hit them slap in the middle." He chewed the nails again. "And all I got to show for it is a load of junk."

"They?" inquired Ackroyd.

"It was a fat man and a small crocodile carrying a sunshade," said the driver, staring at him defiantly.

Soper poked around among the pieces. "That order I gave him has disappeared."

"He used his initiative and put it in the mail-box." Ackroyd eyed him speculatively. "You can cancel it—if you want to forego the local agency for improved better disciplined robots."

"Let it ride," decided Soper. "The margin was small anyway." He kicked half a dozen cogs across the road. "What a mess! Do you call that initiative?"

"I sure do," said Ackroyd. "Deliberately and with malice aforethought he crossed on red."



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CHAPTER I

Raid For The Censor

PRENTISS crawled into the car, drew the extension connector from his concealed throat mike from its clip in his right sleeve, and plugged it into the ignition key socket.

In a moment he said curtly: "Get me the Censor."

The seconds passed as he heard the

click of forming circuits. Then: "E speaking."

"Prentiss, honey."

"Call me 'E,' Prentiss. What news?"

"I've met five classes under Professor Luce. He has a private lab. Doesn't confide in his graduate students. Evidently conducting secret experiments in com-

When the Balance of Nature is Threatened, Prentiss



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Reality

By CHARLES L. HARNESS

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"I see. What are your plans?"

"I'll have his lab searched tonight. If nothing turns up, I'll recommend a drop."

"I'd prefer that you search the lab yourself."

A. Prentiss Rogers concealed his surprise and annoyance. "Very well."

His ear button clicked a dismissal.

With puzzled irritation he snapped the plug from the dash socket, started the car, and eased it down the drive into the boulevard bordering the university.

Didn't she realize that he was a busy

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Struggles to Prevent the Destruction of a Photon!

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Didn't she realize that he was a busy

Struggles to Prevent the Destruction of a Photon!

Field Director with a couple of hundred men under him fully capable of making a routine night search? Undoubtedly she knew just that, but nevertheless was requiring that he do it himself. Why?

And why had she assigned Professor Luce to him personally, squandering so many of his precious hours, when half a dozen of his bright young physical philosophers could have handled it? Nevertheless E, from behind the august anonymity of her solitary initial, had been adamant. He'd never been able to argue with such cool beauty, anyway.

A mile away he turned into a garage on a deserted side street and drew up alongside a Cadillac.

Crush sprang out of the big car and silently held the rear door open for him.

Prentiss got in. "We have a job to-night."

HIS aide hesitated a fraction of a second before slamming the door behind him. Prentiss knew that the squat, asthmatic little man was surprised and delighted.

As for Crush, he'd never got it through his head that the control of human knowledge was a grim and hateful business, not a kind of cruel lark.

"Very good, sir," wheezed Crush, climbing in behind the wheel. "Shall I reserve a sleeping room at the Bureau for the evening?"

"Can't afford to sleep," grumbled Prentiss. "Desk so high now I can't see over it. Take a nap yourself, if you want to."

"Yes, sir. If I feel the need of it, sir."

The ontologist shot a bitter glance at the back of the man's head. No, Crush wouldn't sleep, but not because worry would keep him awake. A holdover from the days when all a Censor man had was a sleepless curiosity and a pocket Geiger, Crush was serenely untroubled by the dangerous and unfathomable implications of philosophical nucleonics. For Crush, "ontology" was just another definition in the dictionary: "The science of reality."

The little aide could never grasp the idea that unless a sane world-wide pat-

tern of nucleonic investigation were followed, some one in Australia—or next door—might one day throw a switch and alter the shape of that reality. That's what made Crush so valuable; he just didn't know enough to be afraid. . . .

Prentiss had clipped the hairs from his nostrils and so far had breathed in complete silence. But now, as that cavernous face was turned toward where he lay stomach-to-earth in the sheltering darkness, his lungs convulsed in an audible gasp.

The mild, polite, somewhat abstracted academic features of Professor Luce were transformed. The face beyond the lab window was now flushed with blood, the thin lips were drawn back in soundless demoniac amusement, the sunken black eyes were dancing with red pinpoints of flame.

By brute will the ontologist forced his attention back to the rat.

Four times in the past few minutes he had watched the animal run down an inclined chute until it reached a fork, choose one fork, receive what must be a nerve-shattering electric shock, and then be replaced in the chute-beginning for the next run. No matter which alternative fork was chosen, the animal always had been shocked into convulsions.

On this fifth run the rat, despite needling blasts of compressed air from the chute walls, was slowing down. Just before it reached the fork it stopped completely.

The air jets struck at it again, and little cones of up-ended gray fur danced on its rump and flanks.

It gradually ceased to tremble; its respiration dropped to normal. It seemed to Prentiss that its eyes were shut.

The air jets lashed out again. It gave no notice, but just lay there, quiescent, in a near coma.

As he peered into the window, Prentiss saw the tall man walk languidly over to the little animal and run a long hooklike forefinger over its back. No reaction. The professor then said something, evidently in a soft slurred voice, for Prentiss had difficulty in reading his lips.

"—when both alternatives are wrong for you, but you *must* do something, you hesitate, don't you, little one? You slow down, and you are lost. You are no longer a rat. Do you know what the universe would be like if a *photon* should slow down? You don't? Have you ever taken a bite out of a balloon, little friend? Just the tiniest possible bite?"

Prentiss cursed. The professor had turned and was walking toward the cages with the animal, and although he was apparently still talking, his lips were no longer visible.

After re-latching the cage-door the professor walked toward the lab entrance, glanced carefully around the room, and then, as he was reaching for the light switch, looked toward Prentiss' window.

For a moment the investigator was convinced that by some nameless power the professor was looking into the darkness, straight into his eyes.

He exhaled slowly. It was preposterous.

The room was plunged in darkness.

THE investigator blinked and closed his eyes. He wouldn't really have to worry until he heard the lab door opening on the opposite side of the little building.

The door didn't open. Prentiss squinted into the darkness of the room.

Where the professor's head had been were now two mysterious tiny red flames, like candles.

Something must be reflecting from the professor's corneas. But the room was dark; there was no light to be reflected. The flame-eyes continued their illusion of studying him.

The hair was crawling on the man's neck when the twin lights finally vanished and he heard the sound of the lab door opening.

As the slow heavy tread died away down the flagstones to the street, Prentiss gulped in a huge lungful of the chill night air and rubbed his sweating face against his sleeve.

What had got into him? He was acting like the greenest cub. He was glad

that Crush had to man the television relay in the Cadillac and couldn't see him.

He got to his hands and knees and crept silently toward the darkened window. It was a simple sliding sash, and a few seconds sufficed to drill through the glass and insert a hook around the sash lock. The rats began a nervous squeaking as he lowered himself into the darkness of the basement room.

His ear-receptor sounded. "The prof is coming back!" wheezed Crush's tinny voice.

Prentiss said something under his breath, but did not pause in drawing his infra-red scanner from his pocket.

He touched his fingers to his throat-mike. "Signal when he reaches the bend in the walk," he hissed. "And be sure you get this on the visor tape."

The apparatus got his first attention.

The investigator had memorized its position perfectly. Approaching as closely in the darkness as he dared, he 'panned' the scanner over some very interesting apparatus that he had noticed on the table.

Then he turned to the books on the desk, regretting that he wouldn't have time to record more than a few pages.

"He's at the bend," warned Crush.

"Okay," mumbled Prentiss, running sensitive fingers over the book bindings. He selected one, opened it at random, and ran the scanner over the invisible pages. "Is this coming through?" he demanded.

"Chief, he's at the door!"

Prentiss had to push back the volume without scanning any more of it. He had just relocked the sash when the lab door swung open.

CHAPTER II

Clues From History

A COUPLE of hours later the ontologist bid a cynical good-morning to his receptionist and secretaries and

stepped into his private office. He dropped with tired thoughtfulness into his swivel chair and pulled out the infrared negatives that Crush had prepared in the Cadillac darkroom. The page from the old German diary was particularly intriguing. He laboriously translated it once more:

As I got deeper into the manuscript, my mouth grew dry, and my heart began to pound. This, I knew, was a contribution the like of which my family has not seen since Copernicus, Roger Bacon, or perhaps even Aristotle. It seemed incredible that this silent little man, who had never been outside of Koenigsberg, should hold the key to the universe—the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he calls it. And I doubt that even he realizes the ultimate portent of his teaching, for he says we cannot know the real shape or nature of anything, that is, the Thing-in-Itself, the Ding-an-Sich, or *noumenon*. He holds that this is the ultimate unknowable, reserved to the gods. He doesn't suspect that, century by century, mankind is nearing this final realization of the final things. Even this brilliant man would probably say that the earth was round in 600 B.C., even as it is today. But I know it was flat, then—as truly flat as it is truly round today. What has changed? Not the Thing-in-Itself we call the Earth. No, it is the mind of man that has changed. But in his preposterous blindness, he mistakes what is really his own mental quickening for a broadened application of science and more precise methods of investigation—

Prentiss smiled.

Luce was undoubtedly a collector of philosophic incunabula. Odd hobby, but that's all it could be—a hobby. Obviously the earth had never been flat, and in fact hadn't changed shape substantially in the last couple of billion years. Certainly any notions as to the flatness of the earth held by primitives of a few thousand years ago or even by contemporaries of Kant were due to their ignorance rather than to accurate observation, and a man of Luce's erudition could only be amused by them.

A GAIN Prentiss found himself smiling with the tolerance of a man standing on the shoulders of twenty centuries of science. The primitives, of course, did the best they could. They just didn't know. They worked with childish premises and infantile instruments.

His brows creased. To assume they had used childish premises was begging the question. On the other hand, was it

really worth a second thought? All he could hope to discover would be a few instances of how inferior apparatus coupled perhaps with unsophisticated deductions had oversimplified the world of the ancients. Still, anything that interested the strange Dr. Luce automatically interested him, Prentiss, until the case was closed.

He dictated into the scriptor:

"Memorandum to Geodetic Section. Rush a paragraph history of ideas concerning shape of earth. Prentiss."

Duty done, he promptly forgot it and turned to the heavy accumulation of reports on his desk.

A quarter of an hour later the scriptor rang and began typing an incoming message.

To the Director. Re your request for brief history of earth's shape. Chaldeans and Babylonians (per clay tablets from library of Assurbanipal), Egyptians (per Ahmes papyrus, ca. 1700 B.C.), Cretans (per inscriptions in royal library at Knossos, ca. 1800 B.C.), Chinese (per Chou Kung ms. ca. 1100 B.C.), Phoenicians (per fragments at Tyre ca. 900 B.C.), Hebrews (per unknown Biblical historian ca. 850 B.C.), and early Greeks (per map of widely-traveled geographer Hecataeus, 517 B.C.) assumed earth to be flat disc. But from the 5th century B.C. forward earth's sphericity universally recognized. . . .

There were a few more lines, winding up with the work done on corrections for flattening at poles, but Prentiss had already lost interest. The report threw no light on Luce's hobby and was devoid of ontological implications.

He tossed the script into the waste basket and returned to the reports before him.

A few minutes later he twisted uneasily in his chair, eyed the scriptor in annoyance, then forced himself back to his work.

No use.

Deriding himself for an idiot, he growled at the machine:

"Memorandum to Geodetic. Re your memo history earth's shape. How do you account for change to belief in sphericity after Hecataeus? Rush. Prentiss."

The seconds ticked by.

He drummed on his desk impatiently, then got up and began pacing the floor.

When the scriptor rang, he bounded back and leaned over his desk, watching the words being typed out.

Late Greeks based spherical shape on observation that mast of approaching ship appeared first, then prow. Not known why similar observation not made by earlier seafaring peoples. . . .

Prentiss rubbed his cheek in perplexity. What was he fishing for?

He thrust the half-born conjecture that the earth really had once been flat back into his mental recesses.

Well, then how about the heavens? Surely there was no record of their having changed during man's brief lifetime.

He'd try one more shot and quit.

"Memo to Astronomy Division. Rush paragraph on early vs. modern sun size and distance."

A few minutes later he was reading the reply:

Skipping Plato, whose data are believed baseless (he measured sun's distance at only twice that of moon), we come to earliest recognized "authority." Ptolemy (Almagest, ca. 140 A.D. measured sun radius as 5.5 that of earth (as against 109 actual); measured sun distance at 1216 (23,000 actual). Fairly accurate measurements date only from 17th and 18th centuries. . . .

He'd read all that somewhere. The difference was easily explained by their primitive instruments. It was insane to keep this up.

But it was too late.

"Memo to Astronomy. Were erroneous Ptolemaic measurements due to lack of precision instruments?"

Soon he had his reply:

To Director: Source of Ptolemy's errors in solar measurement not clearly understood. Used astrolabe precise to 10 seconds and clepsydra water clock incorporating Hero's improvements. With same instruments, and using modern value of pi, Ptolemy measured moon radius (0.29 earth radius vs. 0.273 actual) and distance (59 earth radii vs. 60 1/3 actual). Hence instruments reasonably precise. And note that Copernicus, using quasi-modern instruments and technique, "confirmed" Ptolemaic figure of sun's distance at 1200 earth radii. No explanation known for glaring error.

Unless, suggested something within Prentiss' mind, the sun were closer and much different before the 17th century, when Newton was telling the world

where and how big the sun *ought* to be. But *that* solution was too absurd for further consideration. He would sooner assume his complete insanity.

PUZZLED, the ontologist gnawed his lower lip and stared at the message in the scriptor.

In his abstraction he found himself peering at the symbol "pi" in the scriptor message. *There*, at least, was something that had always been the same, and would endure for all time. He reached over to knock out his pipe in the big circular ash tray by the scriptor and paused in the middle of the second tap. From his desk he fished a tape measure and stretched it across the tray. Ten inches. And then around the circumference. Thirty-one and a half inches. Good enough, considering. It was a result any curious schoolboy could get.

He turned to the scriptor again.

"Memo to Math Section. Rush paragraph history on value of pi. Prentiss."

He didn't have to wait long.

To Director. Re history "pi." Babylonians used value of 3.00. Aristotle made fairly accurate physical and theoretical evaluations. Archimedes first to arrive at modern value, using theory of limits. . . .

There was more, but it was lost on Prentiss. It was inconceivable, of course, that pi had grown during the two millennia that separated the Babylonians from Archimedes. And yet, it was exasperating. Why hadn't they done any better than 3.00? Any child with a piece of string could have demonstrated their error. Countless generations of wise, careful Chaldean astronomers, measuring time and star positions with such incredible accuracy, all coming to grief with a piece of string and pi. It didn't make sense. And certainly pi hadn't grown, any more than the Babylonian 360-day year had grown into the modern 365-day year. It had always been the same, he told himself. The primitives hadn't measured accurately, that was all. That *had* to be the explanation.

He hoped.

He sat down at his desk again, stared a moment at his memo pad and wrote:

Check history of gravity—acceleration. Believe Aristotle unable detect acceleration. Galileo used same instruments, including same crude water clock, and found it. Why? . . . Any reported transits of Vulcan since 1914, when Einstein explained eccentricity of Mercury orbit by relativity instead of by hypothetical sunward planet? . . . How could Oliver Lodge detect an ether-drift and Michelson not? Conceivable that Lorentz contraction not a physical fact before Michelson experiment? . . . How many chemical elements were predicted before discovered?

He tapped absently on the pad a few times, then rang for a research assistant. He'd barely have time to explain what he wanted before he had to meet his class under Luce.

And he still wasn't sure where the rats fitted in.

CHAPTER III

Imperiled World

CURTLY Professor Luce brought his address to a close.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "I guess we'll have to continue this at our next lecture. We seem to have run over a little; class dismissed. Oh, Mr. Prentiss!"

The investigator looked up in genuine surprise. "Yes, sir?" The thin gun in his shoulder holster suddenly felt satisfyingly fat.

He realized that the crucial moment was near, that he would know before he left the campus whether this strange man was a harmless physicist, devoted to his life-work and his queer hobby, or whether he was an incarnate danger to mankind. The professor was acting out of turn, and it was an unexpected break.

"Mr. Prentiss," continued Luce from the lecture platform, "may I see you in my office a moment before you leave?"

Prentiss said, "Certainly." As the group broke up he followed the gaunt scientist through the door that led to Luce's little office behind the lecture room.

At the doorway he hesitated almost imperceptibly; Luce saw it and bowed

sardonically. "After you, sir!"

Then the tall man indicated a chair near his desk. "Sit down, Mr. Prentiss."

For a long moment the seated men studied each other.

Finally the professor spoke. "About fifteen years ago a brilliant young man named Rogers wrote a doctoral dissertation at the University of Vienna on what he called . . . 'Involuntary Conformation of Incoming Sensoria to Apperception Mass.'"

Prentiss began fishing for his pipe. "Indeed?"

"One copy of the dissertation was sent to the Scholarship Society that was financing his studies. All others were seized by the International Bureau of the Censor, and accordingly a demand was made on the Scholarship Society for its copy. But it couldn't be found."

Prentiss was concentrating on lighting his pipe. He wondered if the faint trembling of the match flame was visible.

The professor turned to his desk, opened the top drawer, and pulled out a slim brochure bound in black leather.

The investigator coughed out a cloud of smoke.

The professor did not seem to notice, but opened the front cover and began reading: "'—a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Vienna. A. P. Rogers, Vienna, 1957.'" The man closed the book and studied it thoughtfully. "Adam Prentiss Rogers—the owner of a brain whose like is seen not once in a century. He exposed the gods—then vanished."

Prentiss suppressed a shiver as he met those sunken, implacable eye-caverns.

The cat-and-mouse was over. In a way, he was relieved.

"Why did you vanish then, Mr. Prentiss-Rogers?" demanded Luce. "And why do you now reappear?"

The investigator blew a cloud of smoke toward the low ceiling. "To prevent people like you from introducing sensoria that *can't* be conformed to our present apperception mass. To keep

reality as is. That answers both questions, I think."

The other man smiled. It was not a good thing to see. "Have you succeeded?"

"I don't know. So far, I suppose."

The gaunt man shrugged his shoulders. "You ignore tomorrow, then. I think you have failed, but I can't be sure, of course, until I actually perform the experiment that will create novel sensoria." He leaned forward. "I'll come to the point, Mr. Prentiss-Rogers. Next to yourself—and possibly excepting the Censor—I know more about the mathematical approach to reality than anyone else in the world. I may even know things about it that you don't. On other phases of it I'm weak—because I developed your results on the basis of mere logic rather than insight. And logic, we know, is applicable only within indeterminate limits. But in developing a practical device—an actual machine—for the wholesale alteration of incoming sensoria, I'm enormously ahead of you. You saw my apparatus last night, Mr. Prentiss-Rogers? Oh, come, don't be coy."

PRENTISS drew deeply on his pipe. "I saw it."

"Did you understand it?"

"No. It wasn't all there. At least, the apparatus on the table was incomplete. There's more to it than a Nicol prism and a goniometer."

"Ah, you are clever! Yes, I was wise in not permitting you to remain very long—no longer than necessary to whet your curiosity. Look, then! I offer you a partnership. Check my data and apparatus; in return you may be present when I run the experiment. We will attain enlightenment together. We will know all things. We will be gods!"

"And what about two billion other human beings?" said Prentiss, pressing softly at his shoulder holster.

The professor smiled faintly. "Their lunacy—assuming they continue to exist at all—may become slightly more pronounced, of course. But why worry about them?" The wolf-lip curled fur-

ther. "Don't expect me to believe this aura of altruism, Mr. Prentiss-Rogers. I think you're afraid to face what lies behind our so-called 'reality.'"

"At least I'm a coward in a good cause." He stood up. "Have you any more to say?"

He knew that he was just going through the motions. Luce must have realized he had lain himself open to arrest half a dozen times in as many minutes: The bare possession of the missing copy of the dissertation, the frank admission of plans to experiment with reality, and his attempted bribery of a high Censor official. And yet, the man's very bearing denied the possibility of being cut off in mid-career.

Luce's cheeks fluffed out in a brief sigh. "I'm sorry you can't be intelligent about this, Mr. Prentiss-Rogers. Yet, the time will come, you know, when you must make up your mind to go—*through*, shall we say? In fact, we may have to depend to a considerable degree on one another's companionship—*out there*. Even gods have to pass the time of day occasionally, and I have a suspicion that you and I are going to be quite chummy. So let us not part in enmity."

Prentiss' hand slid beneath his coat lapel and drew out the snub-nosed automatic. He had a grim foreboding that it was futile, and that the professor was laughing silently at him, but he had no choice.

"You are under arrest," he said unemotionally. "Come with me."

The other shrugged his shoulders, then something like a laugh, soundless in its mockery, surged up in his throat. "Certainly, Mr. Prentiss-Rogers."

He arose.

The room was plunged into instant blackness.

Prentiss fired three times, lighting up the gaunt chuckling form at each flash.

"Save your fire, Mr. Prentiss-Rogers. Lead doesn't get far in an intense diamagnetic screen. Study the magnetic damper on a lab balance the next time you're in the Censor Building!"

Somewhere a door slammed.

Several hours later Prentiss was eyeing his aide with ill-concealed distaste. Crush knew that he had been summoned by E to confer on the implications of Luce's escape, and that Crush was secretly sympathizing with him. Prentiss couldn't endure sympathy. He'd prefer that the asthmatic little man tell him how stupid he'd been.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"Sir," gasped Crush apologetically, "I have a report on that gadget you scanned in Luce's lab."

Prentiss was instantly mollified, but suppressed any show of interest. "What about it?"

"In essence, sir," wheezed Crush, "it's just a Nicol prism mounted on a goniometer. According to a routine check it was ground by an obscure optician who was nine years on the job, and he spent nearly all of that time on just one face of the prism. What do you make of that, sir?"

"Nothing, yet. What took him so long?"

"Grinding an absolutely flat edge, sir, so he says."

"Odd. That would mean a boundary composed exclusively of molecules of the same crystal layer, something that hasn't been attempted since the Palomar reflector."

"Yes, sir. And then there's the goniometer mount with just one number on the dial—forty-five degrees."

"Obviously," said Prentiss, "the Nicol is to be used only at a forty-five degree angle to the incoming light. Hence it's probably extremely important—why, I don't know—that the angle be *precisely* forty-five degrees. That would require a perfectly flat surface, too, of course. I suppose you're going to tell me that the goniometric gearing is set up very accurately."

SUDDENLY Prentiss realized that Crush was looking at him in mingled suspicion and admiration.

"Well?" demanded the ontologist irritably. "Just what is the adjusting mechanism? Surely not geometrical? Too crude. Optical, perhaps?"

Crush gasped into his handkerchief. "Yes, sir. The prism is rotated very slowly into a tiny beam of light. Part of the beam is reflected and part refracted. At exactly forty-five degrees it seems, by Jordan's law, that exactly half is reflected and half refracted. The two beams are picked up in a photocell relay that stops the rotating mechanism as soon as the luminosities of the beams are exactly equal."

Prentiss tugged nervously at his ear. It was puzzling. Just what was Luce going to do with such an exquisitely-ground Nicol? At this moment he would have given ten years of his life for an inkling to the supplementary apparatus that went along with the Nicol. It would be something optical, certainly, tied in somehow with neurotic rats. What was it Luce had said the other night in the lab? Something about slowing down a photon. And then what was supposed to happen to the universe? Something like taking a tiny bite out of a balloon, Luce had said.

And how did it all interlock with certain impossible, though syllogistically necessary conclusions that flowed from his recent research into the history of human knowledge?

He wasn't sure. But he *was* sure that Luce was on the verge of using this mysterious apparatus to change the perceptible universe, on a scale so vast that humanity was going to get lost in the shuffle. He'd have to convince E of that.

If he couldn't, he'd seek out Luce himself and kill him with his bare hands, and decide on reasons for it afterward.

He was guiding himself for the time being by pure insight, but he'd better be organized when he confronted E.

Crush was speaking. "Shall we go, sir? Your secretary says the jet is waiting." . . .

The painting showed a man in a red hat and black robes seated behind a high judge's bench. Five other men in red hats were seated behind a lower bench to his right, and four others to his left. At the base of the bench knelt a figure in solitary abjection.

"We condemn you, Galileo Galilei, to

the formal prison of this Holy Office for a period determinable at Our pleasure; and by way of salutary penance, We order you, during the next three years, to recite once a week the seven Penitential Psalms."

Prentiss turned from the inscription to the less readable face of E. That oval olive-hued face was smooth, unlined, even around the eyes, and the black hair was parted off-center and drawn over the woman's head into a bun at the nape of her neck. She wore no make-up, and apparently needed none. She was clad in a black, loose-fitting business suit, which accentuated her perfectly molded body.

"Do you know," said Prentiss coolly, "I think you like being Censor. It's in your blood."

"You're perfectly right. I *do* like being Censor. According to Speer, I effectively suolimate a guilt complex as strange as it is baseless."

"Very interesting. Sort of expiation of an ancestral guilt complex, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Woman started man on his acquisition of knowledge and self-destruction, and ever since has tried futilely to halt the avalanche. In you the feeling of responsibility and guilt runs exceptionally strong, and I'll wager that some nights you wake up in a cold sweat, thinking you've just plucked a certain forbidden fruit."

E STARED icily up at the investigator's twitching mouth. "The only pertinent question," she said crisply, "is whether Luce is engaged in ontologic experiments, and if so, are they of a dangerous nature."

Prentiss sighed. "He's in it up to his neck. But just *what*, and how dangerous, I can only guess."

"Then guess."

"Luce thinks he's developed apparatus for the practical, predictable alteration of sensoria. He hopes to do something with his device that will blow physical laws straight to smithereens. The resulting reality would probably be unrecognizable even to a professional ontologist, let alone the mass of humanity."

"You seem convinced he can do this."

"The probabilities are high."

"Good enough. We can deal only in probabilities. The safest thing, of course, would be to locate Luce and kill him on sight. On the other hand, the faintest breath of scandal would result in Congressional hamstringing of the Bureau, so we must proceed cautiously."

"If Luce is really able to do what he claims," said Prentiss grimly, "and we let him do it, there won't be any Bureau at all—nor any Congress, either."

"I know. Rest assured that if I decide that Luce is dangerous and should die, I shall let neither the lives nor careers of anyone in the Bureau stand in the way, including myself."

Prentiss nodded, wondering if she really meant it.

The woman continued. "We are faced for the first time with a probable violation of our directive forbidding ontologic experiments. We are inclined to prevent this threatened violation by taking a man's life. I think we should settle once and for all whether such harsh measures are indicated, and it is for this that I have invited you to attend a staff conference. We intend to reopen the entire question of ontologic experiments and their implications."

Prentiss groaned inwardly. In matters so important the staff decided by vote. He had a brief vision of attempting to convince E's hard-headed scientists that mankind was changing "reality" from century to century—that not too long ago the earth had been "flat." Yes, by now he was beginning to believe it himself!

"Come this way, please?" said E.

CHAPTER IV

A Changing World

SITTING at E's right was an elderly man, Speer, the famous psychologist. On her left was Goring, staff advi-

sor on nucleonics; next him was Burchard, brilliant chemist and Director of the Western Field, then Prentiss, and then Dobbs, the renowned metallurgist and Director of the Central Field.

Prentiss didn't like Dobbs, who had voted against his promotion to the directorship of Eastern.

E announced: "We may as well start this inquiry with an examination of fundamentals. Mr. Prentiss, just what is reality?"

The ontologist winced. He had needed two hundred pages to outline the theory of reality in his doctoral thesis, and even so, had always suspected his examiners had passed it only because it was incomprehensible—hence a work of genius.

"Well," he began wryly, "I must confess that I don't know what *real* reality is. What most of us call reality is simply an integrated synthesis of incoming sensoria. As such it is nothing more than a working hypothesis in the mind of each of us, forever in a process of revision. In the past that process has been slow and safe. But we have now to consider the consequences of an instantaneous and total revision—a revision so far-reaching that it may thrust humanity face-to-face with the true reality, the world of Things-in-Themselves—Kant's *noumena*. This, I think, would be as disastrous as dumping a group of children in the middle of a forest. They'd have to relearn the simplest things—what to eat, how to protect themselves from elemental forces, and even a new language to deal with their new problems. There'd be few survivors.

"That is what we want to avoid, and we can do it if we prevent any sudden sweeping alteration of sensoria in our present reality."

He looked dubiously at the faces about him. It was a poor start. Speer's wrinkled features were drawn up in a serene smile, and the psychologist seemed to be contemplating the air over Prentiss' head. Goring was regarding him with grave, expressionless eyes. E nodded slightly as Prentiss' gaze traveled past her to a puzzled Burchard, thence to Dobbs, who was frankly contemptuous.

Speer and Goring were going to be the most susceptible. Speer because of his lack of a firm scientific background, Goring because nucleonics was in such a state of flux that nucleic experts were expressing the gravest doubts as to the validity of the laws worshipped by Burchard and Dobbs. Burchard was only a faint possibility. And Dobbs?

Dobbs said: "I don't know what the dickens you're talking about." The implication was plain that he wanted to add: "And I don't think you do, either."

AND Prentiss wasn't so sure that he did know. Ontology was an elusive thing at best.

"I object to the term 'real reality,'" continued Dobbs. "A thing is real or it isn't. No fancy philosophical system can change *that*. And if it's real, it gives off predictable, reproducible sensory stimuli not subject to alteration except in the minds of lunatics."

Prentiss breathed more easily. His course was clear. He'd concentrate on Dobbs, with a little side-play on Burchard. Speer and Goring would never suspect his arguments were really directed at them. He pulled a gold coin from his vest pocket and slid it across the table to Dobbs, being careful not to let it clatter. "You're a metallurgist. Please tell us what this is."

Dobbs picked up the coin and examined it suspiciously. "It's quite obviously a five-dollar gold piece, minted at Fort Worth in Nineteen Sixty-Two. I can even give you the analysis, if you want it."

"I doubt that you could," said Prentiss coolly. "For you see, you are holding a counterfeit coin minted only last week in my own laboratories especially for this conference. As a matter of fact, if you'll forgive my saying so, I had you in mind when I ordered the coin struck. It contains no gold whatever—drop it on the table."

The coin fell from the fingers of the astounded metallurgist and clattered on the oaken table top.

"Hear the false ring?" demanded Prentiss.

PINK-FACED, Dobbs cleared his throat and peered at the coin more closely. "How was I to know that? It's no disgrace, is it? Many clever counterfeits can be detected only in the laboratory. I knew the color was a little on the red side, but that could have been due to the lighting of the room. And of course, I hadn't given it an auditory test before I spoke. The ring is definitely dull. It's obviously a copper-lead alloy, with possibly a little amount of silver to help the ring. All right, I jumped to conclusions. So what? What does that prove?"

"It proves that you have arrived at two separate, distinct, and mutually exclusive realities, starting with the same sensory premises. It proves how easily reality is revised. And that isn't all, as I shall soon—"

"All right," said Dobbs testily. "But on second thought I admitted it was a phony, didn't I?"

"Which demonstrates a further weakness in our routine acquisition and evaluation of pre-digested information. When an unimpeachable authority tells us something as a fact, we immediately, and without conscious thought, *modify* our incoming stimuli to conform with that *fact*. The coin suddenly acquires the red taint of copper, and rings false to the ear."

"I would have caught the queer ring anyhow," said Dobbs stubbornly, "with no help from 'an unimpeachable authority.' The ring would have sounded the same, no matter what you said."

From the corner of his eye Prentiss noticed that Speer was grinning broadly. Had the old psychologist divined his trick? He'd take a chance.

"Dr. Speer," he said, "I think you have something interesting to tell our doubting friend."

Speer cackled dryly. "You've been a perfect guinea pig, Dobbsie. The coin was genuine."

The metallurgist's jaw dropped as he looked blankly from one face to another. Then his jowls slowly grew red. He flung the coin to the table. "Maybe I am a guinea pig. I'm a realist, too. I think

this is a piece of metal. You might fool me as to its color or assay, but in essence and substance, it's a piece of metal." He glared at Prentiss and Speer in turn. "Does anyone deny that?"

"Certainly not," said Prentiss. "Our mental pigeonholes are identical in that respect; they accept the same sensory definition of 'piece of metal,' or 'coin.' Whatever this object is, it emits stimuli that our minds are capable of registering and abstracting as a 'coin.' But note: we make a coin out of it. However, if I could shuffle my cortical pigeonholes, I might find it to be a chair, or a steamer trunk, possibly with Dr. Dobbs inside, or, if the shuffling were extreme, there might be no semantic pattern into which the incoming stimuli could be routed. There wouldn't be anything there at all!"

"Sure," sneered Dobbs. "You could walk right through it."

"Why not?" asked Prentiss gravely. "I think we may do it all the time. Matter is about the emptiest stuff imaginable. If you compressed that coin to eliminate the space between its component atoms and electrons, you couldn't see it in a microscope."

Dobbs stared at the enigmatic gold-piece as though it might suddenly thrust out a pseudopod and swallow him up. Then he said flatly: "No. I don't believe it. It exists as a coin, and only as a coin—whether I know it or not."

"Well," ventured Prentiss, "how about you, Dr. Goring? Is the coin real to you?"

The nucleist smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "If I don't think too much about it, it's real enough. And yet . . ."

Dobb's face clouded. "And yet what? Here it is. Can you doubt the evidence of your own eyes?"

"That's just the difficulty." Goring leaned forward. "My eyes tell me, here's a coin. Theory tells me, here's a mass of hypothetical disturbances in a hypothetical sub-ether in a hypothetical ether. The indeterminacy principle tells me that I can never know both the mass and position of these hypothetical disturbances. And as a physicist I know

that the bare fact of observing something is sufficient to change that something from its pre-observed state. Nevertheless, I compromise by letting my senses and practical experience stick a tag on this particular bit of the unknowable. *X*, after its impact on my mind (whatever *that* is!) equals coin. A single equation with two variables has no solution. The best I can say is, it's a coin, but probably not really—"

"Hah!" declared Burchard. "I can demonstrate the fallacy of *that* position very quickly. If our minds make this a coin, then our minds make this little object an ash-tray, that a window, the thing that holds us up, a chair. You might say we make the air we breathe, and perhaps even the stars and planets. Why, following Prentiss' idea to its logical end, the universe itself is the work of man—a conclusion I'm sure he doesn't intend."

"Oh, but I do," said Prentiss.

PRENTISS took a deep breath. The issue could be dodged no longer. He had to take a stand. "And to make sure you understand me, whether you agree with me or not, I'll state categorically that I believe the apparent universe to be the work of man."

Even E looked startled, but said nothing.

The ontologist continued rapidly. "All of you doubt my sanity. A week ago I would have, too. But since then I've done a great deal of research in the history of science. And I repeat, *the universe is the work of man*. I believe that man began his existence in some incredibly simple world—the original and true *noumenon* of our present universe. And that over the centuries man expanded his little world into its present vastness and incomprehensible intricacy solely by dint of imagination.

"Consequently, I believe that what most of you call the 'real' world has been changing ever since our ancestors began to think."

Dobbs smiled superciliously. "Oh, come now, Prentiss. That's just a rhetorical description of scientific prog-

ress over the past centuries. In the same sense I might say that modern transportation and communications have shrunk the earth. But you'll certainly admit that the physical state of things has been substantially constant ever since the galaxies formed and the earth began to cool, and that the simple cosmologies of early man were simply the result of lack of means for obtaining accurate information?"

"I *won't* admit it," rejoined Prentiss bluntly. "I maintain that their information was substantially accurate. I maintain that at one time in our history the earth was flat—as flat as it is now round, and no one living before the time of Hecataeus, though he might have been equipped with the finest modern instruments, could have proved otherwise. His mind was *conditioned* to a two-dimensional world. Any of us present, if we were transplanted to the world of Hecataeus, could, of course, establish terrestrial sphericity in short order. Our minds have been conditioned to a three-dimensional world. The day may come a few millennia hence when a four-dimensional Terra will be commonplace even to schoolchildren; they will have been intuitively conditioned in relativistic concepts." He added slyly: "And the less intelligent of them may attempt to blame our naive three-dimensional planet on our grossly inaccurate instruments, because it will be as plain as day to them that their planet has four dimensions!"

CHAPTER V

Sentence Is Passed

DOBBS snorted at this amazing idea. The other scientists stared at Prentiss with an awe which was mixed with incredulity.

Goring said cautiously: "I follow up to a certain point. I can see that a primitive society might start out with a limited number of facts. They would offer

theories to harmonize and integrate those facts, and then those first theories would require that new, additional facts exist, and in their search for those secondary facts, extraneous data would turn up inconsistent with the first theories. Secondary theories would then be required, from which hitherto unguessed facts should follow, the confirmation of which would discover more inconsistencies. So the pattern of fact to theory to fact to theory, and so on, finally brings us into our present state of knowledge. Does that follow from your argument?"

Prentiss nodded.

"But won't you admit that the facts were there all the time, and merely awaited discovery?"

"The simple, unelaborated *noumenon* was there all the time, yes. But the new fact—man's new interpretation of the *noumenon*, was generally pure invention—a mental creation, if you like. This will be clearer if you consider how rarely a new fact arises before a theory exists for its explanation. In the ordinary scientific investigation, theory comes first, followed in short order by the 'discovery' of various facts deducible from it."

GORING still looked skeptical. "But that wouldn't mean the fact wasn't there all the time."

"Wouldn't it? Look at the evidence. Has it never struck you as odd in how many instances very obvious facts were 'overlooked' until a theory was propounded that required their existence? Take your nuclear building blocks. Protons and electrons were detected physically only after Rutherford had showed they had to exist. And then when Rutherford found that protons and electrons were not enough to build all the atoms of the periodic table, he postulated the neutron, which of course was duly 'discovered' in the Wilson cloud chamber."

Goring pursed his lips. "But the Wilson cloud chamber would have shown all that prior to the theory, if anyone had only thought to use it."

The mere fact that Wilson didn't invent his cloud chamber until Nineteen Twelve and Geiger didn't invent his counter until Nineteen Thirteen, would not keep sub-atomic particles from existing before that time."

"You don't get the point," said Prentiss. "The primitive, ungeneralized noumenon that we today observe as sub-atomic particles existed prior to Nineteen Twelve, true, but not sub-atomic particles."

"Well, I don't know. . . ." Goring scratched his chin. "How about fundamental forces? Surely electricity existed before Galvani? Even the Greeks knew how to build up electrostatic charges on amber."

"Greek electricity was nothing more than electrostatic charges. Nothing more could be created until Galvani introduced the concept of the electric current."

"Do you mean the electric current didn't exist at all before Galvani?" demanded Burchard. "Not even when lightning struck a conductor?"

"Not even then. We don't know much about pre-Galvanic lightning. While it probably packed a wallop, its destructive potential couldn't have been due to its delivery of an electric current. The Chinese flew kites for centuries before Franklin theorized that lightning was the same as galvanic electricity, but there's no recorded shock from a kite string until our learned statesman drew forth one in Seventeen Sixty-five. Now, only an idiot flies a kite in a storm. It's all according to pattern: theory first, then we alter 'reality' to fit."

Burchard persisted. "Then I suppose you'd say the ninety-two elements are figments of our imagination."

"Correct," agreed Prentiss. "I believe that in the beginning there were only four *noumenal* elements. Man simply elaborated these according to the needs of his growing science. Man made them what they are today—and on occasion, *unmade* them. You remember the havoc Mendelyev created with his periodic law. He declared that the elements had to follow valence sequences of increasing

atomic weight, and when they didn't, he insisted his law was right and that the atomic weights were wrong. He must have had Stas and Berzelius whirling in their graves, because they had worked out the 'erroneous' atomic weights with marvelous precision. The odd thing was, when the weights were rechecked, they fitted the Mendelyev table. But that wasn't all. The old rascal pointed out vacant spots in his table and maintained that there were more elements yet to be discovered. He even predicted what properties they'd have. He was too modest. I state that Nilson, Winkler, and De Boisbaudran merely *discovered* scandium, germanium, and gallium; Mendeleev *created* them, out of the original tetraelemental stuff."

E LEANED forward. "That's a bit strong. Tell me, if man has changed the elements and the cosmos to suit his convenience, what was the cosmos like before man came on the scene?"

"There wasn't any," answered Prentiss. "Remember, by definition, 'cosmos' or 'reality' is simply man's version of the ultimate *noumenal* universe. The 'cosmos' arrives and departs with the mind of man. Consequently, the earth—as such—didn't even exist before the advent of man."

"But the evidence of the rocks . . ." protested E. "Pressures applied over millions, even billions of years, were needed to form them, unless you postulate an omnipotent God who called them into existence as of yesterday."

"I postulate only the omnipotent human mind," said Prentiss. "In the Seventeenth Century, Hooke, Ray, Woodward, to name a few, studied chalk, gravel, marble, and even coal, without finding anything inconsistent with results to be expected from the Noachian Flood. But now that we've made up our minds that the earth is older, the rocks *seem* older, too."

"But how about evolution?" demanded Burchard. "Surely that wasn't a matter of a few centuries?"

"Really?" replied Prentiss. "Again, why assume that the facts are any more

recent than the theory? The evidence is all the other way. Aristotle was a magnificent experimental biologist, and he was convinced that life could be created spontaneously. Before the time of Darwin there was no need for the various species to evolve, because they sprang into being from inanimate matter. As late as the Eighteenth Century, Needham, using a microscope, reported that he saw microbe life arise spontaneously out of sterile culture media. These abiogeneticists were, of course, discredited and their work found to be irreproducible, but only *after* it became evident that the then abiogenetic facts were going to run inconsistent with later 'facts' flowing from advancing biologic theory."

"Then," said Goring, "assuming purely for the sake of argument, that man has altered the original *noumena* into our present reality, just what danger do you think Luce represents to that reality? How could he do anything about it, even if he wanted to? Just what is he up to?"

"Broadly stated," said Prentiss, "Luce intends to destroy the Einsteinian universe."

Burchard frowned and shook his head. "Not so fast. In the first place, how can anyone presume to destroy this planet, much less the whole universe? And why do you say the 'Einsteinian' universe? The universe by any other name is still the universe, isn't it?"

"What Dr. Prentiss means," explained E, "is that Luce wants to revise completely and finally our present comprehension of the universe, which presently happens to be the Einsteinian version, in the expectation that the final version would be the true one—and comprehensible only to Luce and perhaps a few other ontologic experts."

"I don't see it," said Dobbs irritably. "Apparently this Luce contemplates nothing more than publication of a new scientific theory. How can that be bad? A mere theory can't hurt anybody—especially if only two or three people understand it."

"You—and two billion others," said

Prentiss softly, "think that 'reality' cannot be affected by any theory that seems to change it—that it is optional with you to accept or reject the theory. In the past that was true. If the Ptolemaics wanted a geocentric universe, they ignored Copernicus. If the four-dimensional continuum of Einstein and Minkowsky seemed incomprehensible to the Newtonian school they dismissed it, and the planets continued to revolve substantially as Newton predicted. But this is different.

"For the first time we are faced with the probability that the promulgation of a theory is going to *force* an ungraspable reality upon our minds. It will not be optional."

"Well, said Burchard, "if by 'promulgation of a theory' you mean something like the application of the quantum theory and relativity to the production of atomic energy, which of course has changed the shape of civilization in the past generation, whether the individual liked it or not, then I can understand you. But if you mean that Luce is going to make one little experiment that may confirm some new theory or other, and *ipso facto* and instantaneously reality is going to turn topsy turvy, why I say it's nonsense."

"Would anyone," said Prentiss quietly, "care to guess what would happen if Luce were able to destroy a photon?"

GORING laughed shortly. "The question doesn't make sense. The mass-energy entity whose three-dimensional profile we call a photon is indestructible."

"But if you *could* destroy it?" insisted Prentiss. "What would the universe be like afterward?"

"What difference would it make?" demanded Dobbs. "One photon more or less?"

"Plenty," said Goring. "According to the Einstein theory, every particle of matter—energy has a gravitational potential, lambda, and it can be calculated that the total lambdas are precisely sufficient to keep our four-dimensional continuum from closing back on itself. Take

one lambda away—my heavens! The universe would split wide open!"

"Exactly," said Prentiss. "Instead of a continuum, our 'reality' would become a disconnected melange of three-dimensional objects. Time, if it existed, wouldn't bear any relation to spatial things. Only an ontologic expert might be able to synthesize any sense out of such a 'reality.'"

"Well," said Dobbs, "I wouldn't worry too much. I don't think anybody's ever going to destroy a photon." He snickered. "You have to catch one first!"

"Luce can catch one," said Prentiss calmly. "And he can destroy it. At this moment some unimaginable post-Einsteinian universe lies in the palm of his hand. Final, true reality, perhaps. But we aren't ready for it. Kant, perhaps, or *homo superior*, but not the general run of *h. sapiens*. We wouldn't be able to escape our conditioning. We'd be stopped cold."

He stopped. Without looking at Goring, he knew he had convinced the man. Prentiss sagged with visible relief. It was time for a vote. He must strike before Speer and Goring could change their minds.

"Madame"—he shot a questioning glance at the woman—"at any moment my men are going to report that they've located Luce. I must be ready to issue the order for his execution, if in fact the staff believes such disposition proper. I call for a vote of officers!"

"Granted," said E instantly. "Will those in favor of destroying Luce on sight raise their right hands?"

Prentiss and Goring made the required signal.

Speer was silent.

Prentiss felt his heart sinking. Had he made a gross error of judgment?

"I vote against this murder," declared Dobbs. "That's what it is, pure murder."

"I agree with Dobbs," said Burchard shortly.

All eyes were on the psychologist. "I presume you'll join us, Dr. Speer?" demanded Dobbs sternly.

"Count me out, gentlemen. I'd never interfere with anything so inevitable as

the destiny of man. All of you are overlooking a fundamental facet of human nature—man's insatiable hunger for change, novelty—for anything different from what he already has. Prentiss himself states that whenever man grows discontented with his present reality, he starts elaborating it, and the devil take the hindmost. Luce but symbolizes the evil genius of our race—and I mean both our species and the race toward intertwined godhood and destruction. Once born, however, symbols are immortal. It's far too late now to start killing Luces. It was too late when the first man tasted the first apple.

"Furthermore, I think Prentiss greatly overestimates the scope of Luce's pending victory over the rest of mankind. Suppose Luce is actually successful in clearing space and time and suspending the world in the temporal stasis of its present irreality. Suppose he and a few ontologic experts pass on into the ultimate, true reality. How long do you think they can resist the temptation to alter it? If Prentiss is right, eventually they or their descendants will be living in a cosmos as intricate and unpleasant as the one they left, while we, for all practical purposes, will be pleasantly dead.

"No, gentlemen, I won't vote either way."

"Then it is my privilege to break the tie," said E coolly. "I vote for death. Save your remonstrances, Dr. Dobbs. It's after midnight. This meeting is adjourned." She stood up in abrupt dismissal, and the men were soon filing from the room.

E LEFT the table and walked toward the windows on the far side of the room. Prentiss hesitated a moment, but made no effort to leave.

E called over her shoulder, "You, too, Prentiss."

The door closed behind Speer, the last of the group, save Prentiss.

Prentiss walked up behind E.

She gave no sign of awareness.

Six feet away, the man stopped and studied her.

Sitting, walking, standing, she was lovely. Mentally he compared her to Velasquez' Venus. There was the same slender exquisite proportion of thigh, hip, and bust. And he knew she was completely aware of her own beauty, and further, must be aware of his present appreciative scrutiny.

Then her shoulders sagged suddenly, and her voice seemed very tired when she spoke. "So you're still here, Prentiss. Do you believe in intuition?"

"Not often."

"Speer was right. He's always right. Luce will succeed." She dropped her arms to her sides and turned.

"Then may I reiterate, my dear, marry me and let's forget the control of knowledge for a few months."

"Completely out of the question, Prentiss. Our natures are incompatible. You're incorrigibly curious, and I'm incorrigibly, even neurotically, conservative. Besides, how can you even think about such things when we've got to stop Luce?"

His reply was interrupted by the shrilling of the intercom: "Calling Mr. Prentiss. Crush calling Mr. Prentiss. Luce located. Crush calling."

CHAPTER VI

Impending Chaos

WITH his pencil Crush pointed to a shaded area of the map. "This is Luce's Snake-Eyes estate, the famous game preserve and zoo. Somewhere in the center—about here, I think—is a stone cottage. A moving van unloaded some lab equipment there this morning."

"Mr. Prentiss," said E, "how long do you think it will take him to install what he needs for that one experiment?"

The ontologist answered from across the map table. "I can't be sure. I still have no idea of what he's going to try, except that I'm reasonably certain it must be done in absolute darkness. Checking his instruments will require

but a few minutes at most."

The woman began pacing the floor nervously. "I knew it. We can't stop him. We have no time."

"Oh, I don't know," said Prentiss. "How about that stone cottage, Crush? Is it pretty old?"

"Dates from the Eighteenth Century, sir."

"There's your answer," said Prentiss. "It's probably full of holes where the mortar's fallen out. For total darkness he'll have to wait until moonset."

"That's three thirty-four a.m., sir," said Crush.

"We've time for an arrest," said E.

Crush looked dubious. "It's more complicated than that, Madame. Snake-Eyes is fortified to withstand a small army. Luce could hold off any force the Bureau could muster for at least twenty-four hours."

"One atom egg, well done," suggested Prentiss.

"That's the best answer, of course," agreed E. "But you know as well as I what the reaction of Congress would be to such extreme measures. There would be an investigation. The Bureau would be abolished, and all persons responsible for such an expedient would face life imprisonment, perhaps death." She was silent for a moment, then sighed and said: "So be it. If there is no alternative, I shall order the bomb dropped."

"There may be another way," said Prentiss.

"Indeed?"

"Granted an army couldn't get through. One man might. And if he made it, you could call off your bomb."

E exhaled a slow cloud of smoke and studied the glowing tip of her cigarette. Finally she turned and looked into the eyes of the ontologist for the first time since the beginning of the conference. "You can't go."

"Who, then?"

Her eyes dropped. "You're right, of course. But the bomb still falls if you don't get through. It's got to be that way. Do you understand that?"

Prentiss laughed. "I understand."

He addressed his aide. "Crush, I'll

leave the details up to you, bomb and all. We'll rendezvous at these coordinates"—he pointed to the map—"at three sharp. It's after one now. You'd better get started."

"Yes, sir," wheezed Crush, and scurried out of the room.

As the door closed, Prentiss turned to E. "Beginning tomorrow afternoon—or rather, *this* afternoon, after I finish with Luce, I want six months off."

"Granted," murmured E.

"I want you to come with me. I want to find out just what this thing is between us. Just the two of us. It may take a little time."

E smiled crookedly. "If we're both still alive at three thirty-five, and such a thing as a month exists, and you still want me to spend six of them with you, I'll do it. And in return you can do something for me."

"What?"

"You, even above Luce, stand the best chance of adjusting to final reality if Luce is successful in destroying a photon. I'm a border-line case. I'm going to need all the help you can give me, if and when the time comes. Will you remember that?"

"I'll remember," Prentiss said.

At 3 a.m. he joined Crush.

"There are at least seven infra-red scanners in the grounds, sir," said Crush, "not to mention an intricate network of photo relays. And then the wire fence around the lab, with the big cats inside. He must have turned the whole zoo loose." The little man reluctantly helped Prentiss into his infra-red absorbing coveralls. "You weren't meant for tiger fodder, sir. Better call it off."

PRENTISS zipped up his visor and grimaced out into the moonlit dimness of the apple orchard. "You'll take care of the photocell network?"

"Certainly, sir. He's using u.v.-sensitive cells. We'll blanket the area with a u.v.-spot at three-ten."

Prentiss strained his ears, but couldn't hear the 'copter that would carry the u.v.-searchlight—and the bomb.

"It'll be here, sir," Crush assured him. "It won't make any noise, anyhow. What you ought to be worrying about are those wild beasts."

The investigator sniffed at the night air. "Darn little breeze."

"Yeah," gasped Crush. "And variable at that, sir. You can't count on going in up-wind. You want us to create a diversion at one end of the grounds to attract the animals?"

"We don't dare. If necessary, I'll open the aerosol capsule of formaldehyde." He held out his hand. "Good-by, Crush."

His asthmatic assistant shook the extended hand with vigorous sincerity. "Good luck, sir. And don't forget the bomb. We'll have to drop it at three thirty-four sharp."

But Prentiss had vanished into the leafy darkness.

A little later he was studying the luminous figures on his watch. The u.v.-blanket was presumably on. All he had to be careful about in the next forty seconds was a direct collision with a photocell post.

But Crush's survey party had mapped well. He reached the barbed fencing uneventfully, with seconds to spare. He listened a moment, and then in practised silence eased his lithe body high up and over.

The breeze, which a moment before had been in his face, now died away, and the night air hung about him in dark lifeless curtains.

From the stone building a scant two hundred yards ahead, a chink of light peeped out.

Prentiss drew his silenced pistol and began moving forward with swift caution, taking care to place his heel to ground before the toe, and feeling out the character of the ground with the thin soles of his sneakers before each step. A snapping twig might hurl slavering wild beast at his throat.

He stopped motionless in midstride.

From a thicket several yards to his right came an ominous snuffing, followed by a low snarl.

His mouth went suddenly dry as he strained his ears and turned his head

slowly toward the sound.

And then there came the reverberations of something heavy, hurtling toward him.

He whipped his weapon around and waited in a tense crouch, not daring to send a wild, singing bullet across the sward.

The great cat was almost upon him before he fired, and then the faint cough of the stumbling, stricken animal seemed louder than his muffled shot.

Breathing hard, Prentiss stepped away from the dying beast, evidently a panther, and listened for a long time before resuming his march on the cottage. Luce's extraordinary measures to exclude intruders but confirmed his suspicions: Tonight was the last night that the professor could be stopped. He blinked the stinging sweat from his eyes and glanced at his watch. It was 3:15.

Apparently the other animals had not heard him. He stood up to resume his advance, and to his utter relief found that the wind had shifted almost directly into his face and was blowing steadily.

In another three minutes he was standing at the massive door of the building, running practised fingers over the great iron hinges and lock. Undoubtedly the thing was going to squeak; there was no time to apply oil and wait for it to soak in. The lock could be easily picked.

And the squeaking of a rusty hinge was probably immaterial. A cunning operator like Luce would undoubtedly have wired an alarm into it. He just couldn't believe Crush's report to the contrary.

But he couldn't stand here.

There was only one way to get inside quickly, and alive.

Chuckling at his own madness, Prentiss began to pound on the door.

He could visualize the blinking out of the slit of light above his head, and knew that, somewhere within the building, two flame-lit eyes were studying him in an infra-red scanner.

Prentiss tried simultaneously to listen to the muffled squeaking of the rats

beyond the great door and to the swift, padding approach of something big behind him.

"Luce!" he cried. "It's Prentiss! Let me in!"

A LATCH slid somewhere; the door eased inward. The investigator threw his gun rearward at a pair of bounding eyes, laced his fingers over his head, and stumbled into more darkness.

Despite the protection of his hands, the terrific blow of the blackjack on his temple almost knocked him out.

He closed his eyes, crumpled carefully to the floor, and noted with satisfaction that his wrists were being tied behind his back. As he had anticipated, it was a clumsy job, even without his imperceptible "assistance." Long fingers ran over his body in a search for more weapons.

Then he felt the sting of a hypodermic needle in his biceps.

The lights came on.

He struggled feebly, emitted a plausible groan, and tried to sit up.

From far above, the strange face of Dr. Luce looked down at him, illuminated, it seemed to Prentiss, by some unhallowed inner fire.

"What time is it?" asked Prentiss.

"Approximately three-twenty."

"Hm. Your kittens gave me quite a reception, my dear professor."

"As befits an uncooperative meddler."

"Well, what are you going to do with me?"

"Kill you."

Luce pulled a pistol from his coat pocket.

Prentiss wet his lips. During his ten years with the Bureau, he had never had to deal with anyone quite like Luce. The gaunt man personified megalomania on a scale beyond anything the investigator had previously encountered—or imagined possible.

And, he realized with a shiver, Luce was very probably justified in his prospects (not delusions!) of grandeur.

With growing alarm he watched Luce snap off the safety lock of the pistol. There were two possible chances of

surviving more than a few seconds.

Luce's index finger began to tense around the trigger.

One of those chances was to appeal to Luce's megalomania, treating him as a human being. Tell him, "I know you won't kill me until you've had a chance to gloat over me—to tell me, the inventor of ontologic synthesis, how you found a practical application of it."

No good. Too obvious to one of Luce's intelligence.

The approach must be to a demi-god, in humility. Oddly enough his curiosity was tinged with respect. Luce *did* have something.

Prentiss licked his lips again and said hurriedly: "I must die, then. But could you show me—is it asking too much to show me, just how you propose to 'go through'?"

The gun lowered a fraction of an inch. Luce eyed the doomed man suspiciously.

"Would you, please?" continued Prentiss. His voice was dry, cracking. "Ever since I discovered that new realities could be synthesized, I've wondered whether *homo sapiens* was capable of finding a practical device for uncovering the true reality. And all who've worked on it have insisted that only a brain but little below the angels was capable of such an achievement." He coughed apologetically. "It is difficult to believe that a mere mortal has really accomplished what you claim—and yet, there's something about you . . ." His voice trailed off, and he laughed deprecatingly.

Luce bit; he thrust the gun back into his coat pocket. "So you know when you're licked," he sneered. "Well, I'll let you live a moment longer."

He stepped back and pulled aside a black screen. "Has the inimitable ontologist the wit to understand this?"

WITHIN a few seconds of his introduction to the instrument everything was painfully clear. Prentiss now abandoned any remote hope that either Luce's method or apparatus would prove faulty. Both the vacuum-glassed machinery and the idea behind it were perfect.

Basically, the supplementary unit, which he now saw for the first time, consisted of a sodium-vapor light bulb, blacked out except for one tiny transparent spot. Ahead of the little window was a series of what must be hundreds of black discs mounted on a common axis. Each disc bore a slender radial slot. And though he could not trace all the gearing, Prentiss knew that the discs were geared to permit one and only one fleeting photon of yellow light to emerge at the end of the disc series, where it would pass through a Kerr electro-optic field and be polarized.

That photon would then travel one centimeter to that fabulous Nicol prism, one surface of which had been machined flat to a molecule's thickness. That surface was turned by means of an equally marvelous goniometer to meet the oncoming photon at an angle of exactly 45 degrees. And then would come chaos.

The cool voice of E sounded in his ear receptor. "Prentiss it's three-thirty. If you understand the apparatus, and find it dangerous, will you so signify? If possible, describe it for the tapes."

"I understand your apparatus perfectly," said Prentiss.

Luce grunted, half irritated, half curious.

Prentiss continued hurriedly. "Shall I tell you how you decided upon this specific apparatus?"

"If you think you can."

"You have undoubtedly seen the sun reflect from the surface of the sea."

Luce nodded.

"But the fish beneath the surface see the sun, too," continued Prentiss. "Some of the photons are reflected and reach you, and some are refracted and reach the fish. But, for a given wave length, the photons are identical. Why should one be absorbed and another reflected?"

"You're on the right track," admitted Luce, "but couldn't you account for their behavior by Jordan's law?"

"Statistically, yes. Individually, no. In Nineteen Thirty-four Jordan showed that a beam of polarized light splits up when it hits a Nicol prism. He proved that when the prism forms an angle,

alpha, with the plane of polarization of the prism, a fraction of the light equal to $\cos^2\alpha$ passes through the prism, and the remainder, $\sin^2\alpha$, is reflected. For example, if alpha is 60 degrees, three-fourths of the photons are reflected and one-fourth are refracted. But note that Jordan's law applied only to streams of photons, and you're dealing with a single photon, to which you're presenting an angle of exactly 45°. And how does a single photon make up its mind—or the photonic equivalent of a mind—when the probability of reflecting is exactly equal to the probability of refracting? Of course, if our photon is but one little mote along with billions of others, the whole comprising a light beam, we can visualize orders left for him by a sort of statistical traffic keeper stationed somewhere in the beam. A member of a beam, it may be presumed, has a pretty good idea of how many of his brothers have already reflected, and how many refracted, and hence knows which he must do."

"But suppose our single photon isn't in a beam at all?" said Luce.

"Your apparatus," said Prentiss, "is going to provide just such a photon. And I think it will be a highly confused little photon, just as your experimental rat was, that night not so long ago. I think it was Schroedinger who said that these physical particles were startlingly human in many of their aspects. Yes, your photon will be given a choice of equal probability. Shall he reflect? Shall he refract? The chances are 50 percent for either choice. He will have no reason for selecting one in preference to the other. There will have been no swarm of preceding photons to set up a traffic guide for him. He'll be puzzled; and trying to meet a situation for which he has no proper response, he'll slow down. And when he does, he'll cease to be a photon, which must travel at the speed of light or cease to exist. Like your rat, like many human beings, he solves the unsolvable by disintegrating."

Luce said: "And when it disintegrates, there disappears one of the lambdas that hold together the Einstein

space-time continuum. And when *that* goes, what's left can be only final reality untainted by theory or imagination. Do you see any flaw in my plan?"

CHAPTER VII

New World

TUGGING with subtle quickness on the cords that bound him, Prentiss knew there was no flaw in the man's reasoning, and that every human being on earth was now living on borrowed time.

He could think of no way to stop him; there remained only the bare threat of the bomb.

He said tersely: "If you don't submit to peaceable arrest within a few seconds, an atom bomb is going to be dropped on this area."

Sweat was getting into his eyes again, and he winked rapidly.

Luce's dark features convulsed, hung limp, then coalesced into a harsh grin. "She'll be too late," he said with grim good humor. "Her ancestors tried for centuries to thwart mine. But we were successful—always. Tonight I succeed again, and for all time."

Prentiss had one hand free.

In seconds he would be at the man's throat. He worked with quiet fury at the loops around his bound wrist.

Again E's voice in his ear receptor. "I had to do it!" The tones were strangely sad, self-accusing, remorseful.

Had to do *what*?

And his dazed mind was trying to digest the fact that E had just destroyed him.

She was continuing. "The bomb was dropped ten seconds ago." She was almost pleading, and her words were running together. "You were helpless; you couldn't kill him. I had a sudden premonition of what the world would be like—afterward—even for those who go through. Forgive me."

Almost mechanically he resumed his fumbling with the cord.

Luce looked up. "What's that?"

"What?" asked Prentiss dully. "I don't hear anything."

"Of course you do! Listen!"

The wrist came free.

Several things happened.

That faraway shriek in the skies grew into a howling crescendo of destruction.

As one man Prentiss and Luce leaped toward the activator switches. Luce got there first—an infinitesimal fraction of time before the walls were completely disintegrated.

There was a brief, soundless interval of utter blackness.

And then it seemed to Prentiss that a titanic stone wall crashed into his brain, and held him, mute, immobile.

But he was not dead.

For the name of this armored, stunning wall was not the bomb, but Time itself.

He knew in a brief flash of insight, that for sentient, thinking beings, Time had suddenly become a barricade rather than an endless road.

The exploding bomb—the caving cottage walls—were hanging, somewhere, frozen fast in an immutable, eternal stasis.

Luce had separated this fleeting unseen dimension from the creatures and things that had flowed along it. There is no existence without change along a temporal continuum. And now the continuum had been shattered.

Was this, then the fate of all tangible things—of all humanity?

Were none of them—not even the two or three who understod advanced ontology, to—get through?

There was nothing but a black, eerie silence all around.

His senses were useless.

He even doubted he had any sensés.

So far as he could tell he was nothing but an intelligence, floating in space. But he couldn't even be sure of *that*. Intelligence—space—they weren't necessarily the same now as before.

All that he knew for sure was that he doubted. He doubted everything except the fact of doubting.

Shades of Descartes!

To doubt is to think!

Ergo sum!

I exist.

INSTANTLY he was wary. He existed, but not necessarily as Adam Prentiss Rogers. For the *noumenon* of Adam Prentiss Rogers might be—whom?

But he was safe. He was going to get through.

Relax, be resilient, he urged his whirling brain. You're on the verge of something marvelous.

It seemed that he could almost hear himself talk, and he was glad. A voiceless final reality would have been unbearable.

He essayed a tentative whisper:

"E!"

From somewhere far away a woman whimpered.

He cried eagerly into the blackness. "Is that you?"

Something unintelligible and strangely frightening answered him.

"Don't try to hold on to yourself," he cried. "Just let yourself go! Remember, you won't be E any more, but the *noumenon*, the essence of E. Unless you change enough to permit your *noumenon* to take over your old identity, you'll have to stay behind."

There was a groan. "But I'm *me*!"

"But you *aren't*—not really," he pleaded quickly. "You're just an aspect of a larger, symbolical *you*—the *noumenon* of E. It's yours for the asking. You have only to hold out your hand to grasp the shape of final reality. And you *must*, or cease to exist!"

A wail: "But what will happen to my body?"

The ontologist almost laughed. "I wouldn't know; but if it changes, I'll be sorrier than you!"

There was a silence.

"E!" he called.

No answer.

"E! Did you get through? *E*!"

The empty echoes skirled between the confines of his narrow blackness.

Had the woman lost even her struggling interstitial existence? Whenever, whatever, or wherever she now was, he

could no longer detect.

Somehow, if it had ever come to this, he had counted on her being with him—just the two of them.

In stunned uneasy wonder he considered what his existence was going to be like from now on.

And what about Luce?

Had the demonic professor possessed sufficient mental elasticity to slip through?

And if so, just what was the professorial *noumenon*—the real Luce—like?

He'd soon know.

The ontologist relaxed again, and began floating through a dreamy patch of light and darkness. A pale glow began gradually to form about his eyes, and shadowy things began to form, dissolve, and reform.

He felt a great rush of gratitude. At least the shape of final reality was to be visible.

And then, at about the spot where Luce had stood, he saw the Eyes—two tiny red flames, transfixing him with unfathomable fury.

The same eyes that had burned into his that night of his first search!

Luce had got through—but wait!

An unholy aura was playing about the sinuous shadow that contained the jeweled flames. Those eyes were brilliant, horrid facets of hate in the head of a huge, coiling serpent-thing! Snake-Eyes!

In mounting awe and fear the ontologist understood that Luce had not got through—as Luce. That the *noumenon*, the essence, of Luce—was nothing human. That Luce, the bearer of light, aspirant to godhood, was not just Luce!

By the faint light he began shrinking away from the coiled horror, and in the act saw that *he*, at least, still had a human body. He knew this, because he was completely nude.

He was still human, and the snake-creature wasn't—and therefore never had been.

THEN he noticed that the stone cottage was gone, and that a pink glow was coming from the east.

He crashed into a tree before he had gone a dozen steps.

Yesterday there had been no trees within three hundred yards of the cottage.

But that made sense, for there was no cottage any more, and no yesterday. Crush ought to be waiting somewhere out here—except that Crush hadn't got through, and hence didn't really exist.

He went around the tree. It obscured his view of the snake-creature for a moment, and when he tried to find it again, it was gone.

He was glad for the momentary relief, and began looking about him in the half-light. He took a deep breath.

The animals, if they still existed, had vanished with the coming of dawn. The grassy, flower-dotted swards scintillated like emeralds in the early morning haze. From somewhere came the babble of running water.

Meta-universe, by whatever name you called it, was beautiful, like a gorgeous garden. What a pity he must live and die here alone, with nothing but a lot of animals for company. He'd willingly give an arm, or at least a rib, if—

"Adam Prentiss! *Adam!*"

He whirled and stared toward the orchard in elated disbelief.

"E! *Eve!*"

She'd got through!

The whole world, and just the two of them!

His heart was pounding ecstatically as he began to run lithely upwind.

And they'd keep it this way, simple and sweet, forever, and their children after them. To hell with science and progress! (Well, within practical limits, of course.)

As he ran, there rippled about his quivering nostrils the seductive scent of apple blossoms.



Machiavelli would have been a piker on Maxus!

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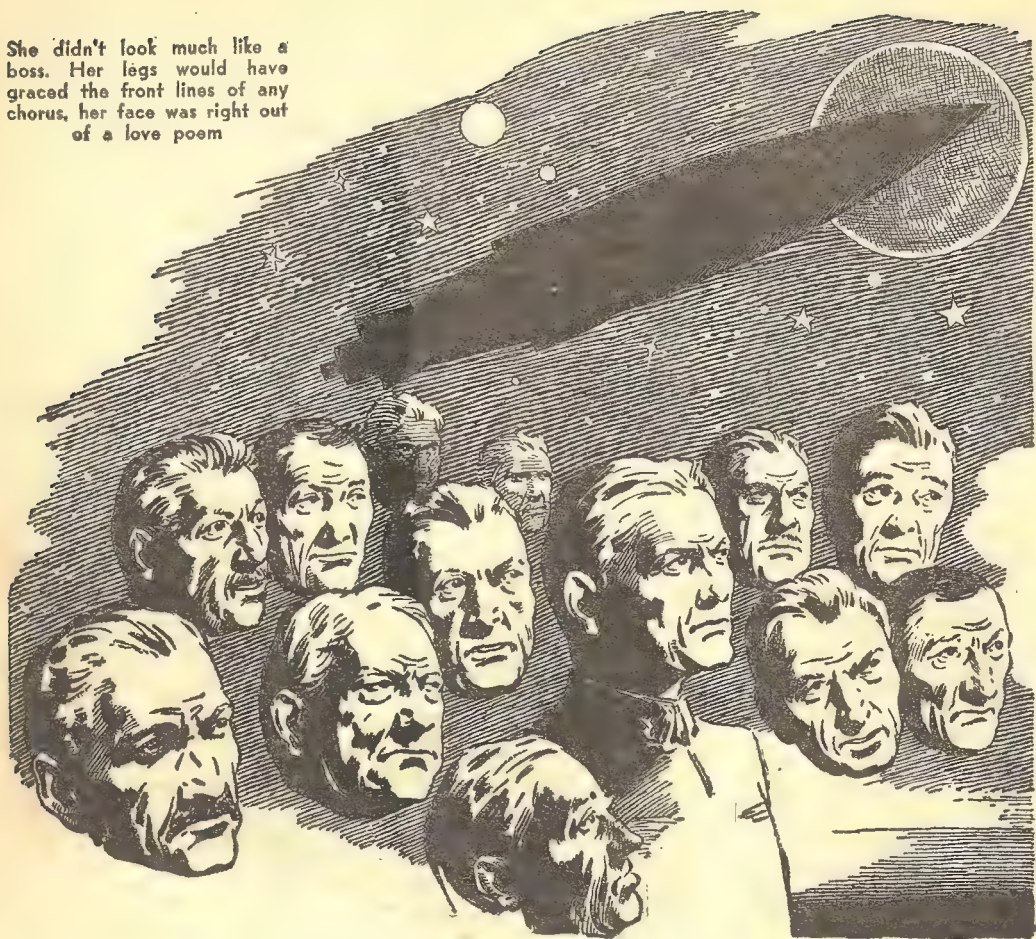
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CAPTAIN

A Complete Novelet

CHAPTER I

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by CLEVE CARTMILL

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administration building flight room, a scattered group waited silent and grim for take-off time. This group was composed mainly of the *Talisman's* crew, each man as famous as the ship herself.

Skipper J. F. Lincoln—"Captain Famine"—looked out with hard, expressionless blue eyes at the demonstration on the field. His long jaw was set, his big, space-tanned hands clenched in the pockets of his uniform jacket.

Chief Pilot R. T. Selden, as white-haired as the captain, sat at a chart desk and ran an aimless finger back and forth, back and forth, along the edge of the desk, completely unaware that he was doing so.

The machine-shop crew of three were huddled loosely in a corner, paying no attention to each other nor to anyone else in the room.

"Corky" McKorkle, news commentator, moved about under a mantle of restless gloom, thinking of his futile efforts in print, and on the screens of the world, to stop the junking of the gallant old ship. And now he was to go along to record this last flight for a combine of news agencies.

"I'll jerk tears," he thought savagely. "I'll make 'em cry!"

OPENING of the corridor door went unnoticed, but the booming voice that invaded the room brought heads snapping around, focused eyes on the frail and weather-beaten little man who entered in a wheel chair. This was Sam James, chief engineer.

"Thought they could keep me off ship, did they?" he cried in his amazingly deep, powerful voice. "Howdy, boys!"

He shook hands all around. This was a silent ceremony. Corky had the impression these men had no need to speak. The expression in their eyes, the firm handclasp, said it all. They didn't like the situation, but they would obey orders and carry out this last assignment.

The officers and crew of *Old Standby* were now present, except for the cook and steward, who were aboard checking the storage of last-minute food items.

Corky dreaded the arrival of the two remaining members of the voyage—Lieutenant Harvey Clay, liaison man between *Old Standby* and the escort vessel, and Councilwoman Janice Lowell. Corky's dread was not exactly definable. Part of it may have had to do with the known hazards of a trip through the Coal Sack. Mainly it was the uneasiness he always experienced in the presence of High Brass, and embarrassment for Captain Lincoln, whose authority was technically superseded by Miss Lowell's. But over all was the general feeling of impending disaster.

Lieutenant Clay came into the flight room then, a brisk, scrubbed young man with friendly dark eyes, a full-faced smile, and a becomingly correct manner. He saluted the captain, and introduced himself.

"Reporting for duty, sir."

Corky watched the captain intently. The old man was grave and courteous as he presented each man of the crew to Clay, but Corky thought he saw resentment in the cold blue eyes, defiance in added erectness, determination in the set of the jaw.

Determination to do what?—Corky asked himself. Surely the skipper wouldn't dare to go contrary to orders, not while an armed escort vessel was along, a vessel that could fly orbits around the battered *Old Standby*?

But there was something behind the smooth exterior, something ragged and raw, reflected in the overly polite attitude of every man in the room.

Miss Lowell's arrival put a thin crust of ice on the coldness. She was the boss, and these men had been on their own for more than thirty years. She didn't look much like a boss, Corky reflected. She was slim and trim in blue. A coat of golden fur, matching her hair, was draped over one arm. Her legs would have graced the front line of any chorus. Her face was right out of a love poem. But her eyes and her walk had no nonsense about them.

"Is everybody present?" she crisply asked the captain. He explained about the cook and steward.

"Get them here," she said, "for general inspection."

Captain Lincoln frowned. "Inspection, Miss Lowell? I know my crew, ma'am."

"Those are my orders, Captain. And," she added levelly, "yours."

"Very well, ma'am," the captain replied coldly, and went to the wall 'visor to summon the galley contingent.

Councilwoman Lowell idly scanned the crowd outside until the remaining two members arrived. Without looking at the captain, she asked, over her shoulder, that he have his men form a line. They did so, without a trace of expression on their stony faces.

AFTER they were in formation, she turned around, faced them. "I am the representative of the Executive Council," she told them. "My name is Janice Lowell. My orders are to see that the policies of the Council are carried out to the letter, with as much dispatch as is safe. I naturally have an interest in the men who will actually put these orders into effect. You, sir," she said to Chief Pilot Selden, "what is your name and function?"

She went down the line, until she came to Sam James in his wheel chair. "You are not a member of the crew, I take it?" she asked.

"I'm chief engineer," he boomed.

"But retired, I believe?"

"Not for this voyage, ma'am. I've got orders from the admiral himself. Though I almost had to break a couple of heads to get him," he added.

Miss Lowell turned to the skipper. "Captain, this man is unable to carry out his duties. He is physically unfit. I'm sorry, but he must be replaced."

"Unfit?" Sam James roared. "Unfit to push buttons? I'm going along!"

Miss Lowell paid him no attention. She looked steadily at the skipper, who returned her unwavering stare but said nothing. The silence got thicker than a meteor shower. Corky broke it.

"Wait'll the public hears this," he said. "Putting Sam James off his own ship!"

She turned, looked Corky up and down. "Who are you?" When he told her, she didn't seem impressed. "I suppose," she said, "you are partly responsible for that sentimental hysteria outside?"

"I sincerely hope so," Corky said.

The councilwoman gave a ladylike snort and turned back to the captain.

"All this crew, including myself, ma'am," Captain Lincoln said gently, "are on the retired list. We have been given special permission to take the *Talisman* to her grave. If one of us goes off ship, we all go. You have the authority to prevent Chief James from shipping with us, but neither you nor anyone else can make us fly her."

Miss Lowell did nothing so banal as to let her mouth drop open in astonishment. In fact, she did nothing at all for a thoughtful moment.

"You mean," she asked presently, "that you are defying orders from your superior officer?"

"Exactly what I mean, ma'am, maybe had better be threshed out in a court-martial, if it comes to that. Chief James has served the *Talisman* for many years. You heard, no doubt," he said dryly, "how he lost the use of his legs?"

"Exposing himself to radiations of a damaged tube? Yes, I heard. A heroic act. You understand, Captain, and you, Chief, that my main concern is for the safety of the personnel aboard. My considered opinion is that Chief James is physically unfit to act in an emergency. I have the authority to forbid his making the trip."

"I haven't questioned your authority, ma'am," Lincoln said.

"Could I put in my two cents?" Corky asked.

Janice Lowell made an impatient gesture. "I think I'm beginning to dislike you, Mr. McKorkle."

"Likewise, I'm sure," Corky retorted. "But you're a young gal impressed with the importance of authority, and apt to overlook some of the things people live by. My advice is free, and whether you take it or not, here it is: 'Pipe down!'"

She flushed. "You're impertinent!"

"Not at all. I speak for your own good. Look what you're up against. *Old Standby* has made more rescues in space than the sum total attempted by all other ships put together. And every rescue attempted by *Old Standby* and her crew was completely successful. Nobody died. They were brought in safe, if hungry." He grinned. "That's how the skipper got his name. Lots of people don't know his name is Lincoln, but you mention Captain Famine or *Old Standby* or Shorty James any place where language is a means of communication, and you'll see faces light up."

"I know the history," Miss Lowell said. "Get to the point."

"The point is, these guys have come out of retirement to take *Old Standby* on her last flight. Sentimental? Maybe. But they want to do it themselves, since somebody's got to. And if you or anybody else try to stop them, you can kiss good-by any career you might have had in mind. Believe me, those people out there are sore. They're resigned and won't try to stop the flight, because they're law-abiding. But it wouldn't take much to set them off. Do you want the responsibility?"

CHAPTER II

Unrest in Space

COUNCILWOMAN LOWELL glared at Corky for a moment before turning to the line of men. "Rest!" she snapped, and began to pace back and forth, frowning at the floor.

The men relaxed. The captain turned once more to the window to stare unseeingly at the seething crowd. Corky sat in a corner and kept a casual eye on the entire group.

Miss Lowell stopped her pacing and raised her head.

"Please listen to me," she called. "I realize what the name *Old Standby* means to billions of people. It's a symbol of heroism, of fighting against terrible

odds. I also realize what might result if this crew should fail to make this trip. The feeling built up by clever people like Mr. McKorkle might burst into action with lamentable consequences. I want you to believe that I am not an ogre, but neither am I an irresponsible girl impressed by the sense of my own importance, as some would have you believe."

She did not glance at Corky as she said this, but the glance was implied in her voice and the sardonic nod of the head could almost be seen. "I therefore withdraw my order concerning Chief James, but not my objection."

"The ceremony," Captain Lincoln said into the ensuing silence, "is due to begin. Shall we march to the reviewing stand?"

The admiral himself made the keynoting speech, composed mainly of what one would expect. Gallant ship, gallant men, known and revered everywhere, and so on. Obsolete type, due for honorable retirement; what better place than the planet of Silvor, where metal and machinery were at a premium, navy policy—and so the admiral rumbled on.

Corky paid little attention to the proceedings. He watched the men of the *Old Standby*. Each had gone back to that far-looking, that repressed inner turmoil. Each was granite-faced again. Each seemed to hear nothing that went on about him.

Corky shivered.

Then somebody broke a bottle of champagne, the band tootled, and the personnel of the last flight of *Old Standby* filed aboard. Cheers were raised, tears were shed. But by the crowd only. The crew of the ship went aboard with unseeing eyes, inattentive ears and rigid faces.

* * * * *

Old Standby hung motionless in space. The escort ship ahead was an unmoving dot on the pilot's screen. At least, Corky thought, that was the way it seemed. He knew intellectually that they were traveling at incredible speed, but space is so empty and points of reference so far away that his senses told him they

were hanging still in the blackness.

His intellect also told him that everything was orderly. Everyone was polite and businesslike. It had all the appearance of any routine flight.

But his senses put this peaceful scene out of focus, distorted it until it jarred on his nerves. He told himself again and again that he had no reason to feel that violence lurked beneath the surface courtesy of all personnel aboard. But reasoning didn't stop his feeling it.

He spent the first few days watching, analyzing. He found neither act nor word to support his inner conviction that conditions were not as they seemed. Everyone, except the galley crew and officer of the watch, met three times daily in the dining saloon. And everyone was meticulously polite. If there was no laughter, no gentle raillery, there was also no overt unpleasantness.

But still Corky's impression persisted. He cornered Janice Lowell in the combination library-lounge-exercise room.

"I know we don't seem to have much in common, Miss Lowell," he said, "but we're the only civilians aboard, and I'd like to talk to you about something."

She turned away from the viewport looking out on brilliant, scattered suns. Her eyes, a deep violet in the wall-reflected light, showed no expression. She said nothing.

Corky gave her a halting, confused description of his conviction and freely admitted it was emotional.

"But I've found," he said, "that these indefinable—uh—intuitions, I guess, have been frequently more dependable than a cold-blooded analysis of factors. Haven't you?"

"Never," she said. "Uncontrolled emotion has no place in intelligent life forms."

"I see," Corky said dryly. Movement in the main passage beyond the lounge door caught his eye. Chief Pilot Selden passed on his way forward. Corky turned back to the councilwoman. "Then you don't share my feeling that something—unpleasant—is going to happen?"

Sam James passed the door, wheeling his way forward.

"No," Janice Lowell said.

"I know from experience," Corky said stubbornly, "that when I feel like this, something unpleasant—or worse—is going to happen. Maybe I've made a subconsciously objective analysis of the factors involved here, and maybe the conscious effect of that analysis on me is purely emotional, but I *know* something's out of focus."

The cook and his steward went by, headed for the control room.

"Indeed?" Miss Lowell murmured. "If you'll pardon me, Mr. McKorkle, I think I'll retire."

HARVEY CLAY, the liaison officer, came into the lounge shortly after Miss Lowell walked out. Corky wondered if Clay would ever lose that freshly scrubbed look.

"Ahoy, Lieutenant," he murmured politely, as the machine-shop crew passed by on the way forward.

"How are you, Mr. McKorkle?"

"Pretty good. Everything all right?"

"Steady as she goes. Thought I'd have a smoke and then hit the sack. Like a game of chess?"

"Some other time, thanks," Corky said. He reflected that the entire crew of the ship was now in the control room. Why?

He said goodnight and wandered aimlessly forward himself. He felt a mild exultation. This concentration of personnel, certainly out of the ordinary, supported his hunch. There was no reason for the congregation, except in case of emergency. And no emergency existed. Otherwise, Clay wouldn't have been so carefree.

Corky moved silently as he approached the control room in the nose of the ship. He could see nobody in his line of vision. The pilot's panel was directly at the end of the passageway, and the forward screen above it on the far bulkhead showed the motionless dot of the escort vessel ahead.

He stepped cautiously when he came within earshot of a murmur of voices.

One voice—he couldn't identify it—rose out of the quiet babble:

"Put it to a vote!"

The murmur rose briefly, unintelligibly, engulfed the individual voice, and sank back. Corky moved to the entrance. The murmur stopped. Faces turned toward him, intent, grave faces.

The captain's face changed first. It conjured up a smile. Like a mask, Corky thought.

"Come in, Mr. McKorkle!" The voice was hearty. "We thought you had retired or we'd have called you. We were just yarning over old times."

The other faces took the cue, except for the cook. After that first intent look, the cook paid no attention to Corky.

"Yes, lad," boomed Sam James. "Join us."

Corky wondered how corny can you get? It was perfectly obvious they were not talking over old times. It was clear, in the forced welcome in eye and voice, that they wished he'd get lost. Well, he'd been invited. Maybe he could learn something.

"Thanks," he said with a false heartiness that matched the skipper's. "Maybe I can get a couple of stories. What particular time were you talking about?"

"The rescue off Venus."

"That freighter headed for Gany-mede."

The Captain and Sam James spoke respectively, simultaneously. Each eyed the other. Each motioned the other to carry the conversational ball. Corky waited, watching.

The steward wore a silly grin. Grizzled Chief Pilot Selden was smiling, but it was a faint, almost secret smile, reflecting an inner amusement. But his face was flushed as the captain's and Sam James'.

"It was a little of both, I guess," Sam said. "We were trying to decide which was the most interesting. On the Venus rescue—"

He went on to relate the story Corky knew almost by heart—that is to say, Sam told it in almost the same words Corky had used to describe the event for the interplanet release.

"About that freighter, though—" Captain Lincoln interrupted.

And Corky listened to *that* story in the captain's precise phraseology. This was another exploit that he knew and had described professionally. It varied in minor details from the other, but with the same happy ending—everybody got back alive but hungry.

"What do you think, Mr. McKorkle?" Chief Engineer James asked. "Which is the most interesting?"

Corky had had enough of forced camaraderie.

"It's hard to say. They both have their points. Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'll go hunt up a nice, peaceful pillowful of dreams."

A little later he lay wide-eyed in the silent dark and wondered. Why had they gathered together? "Put it to a vote!"

Put what? Before he could even hazard a guess, he needed more data. Tomorrow, he thought, he'd start gathering.

THE MEAL after sleeping was pretty much of a pattern, full of polite tension, but Corky noticed that the eyes of the crew held new life, a new sparkle. The men, from Captain Lincoln down to the steward, seemed no longer occupied with their own individual problems. A new feeling of unity was in the air. Corky couldn't define with exactitude the reasons why he felt this, but he did and accepted it as observational data.

He went hunting. He didn't know what he was hunting for. He was just hunting.

He moped along the main corridor aft of the lounge, moving aimlessly toward the engine room. His eye caught movement at the end of a transverse passageway. He right-angled along this until he saw the foreman of the engine room slip into a lifeboat with a full testing kit.

Corky stood unobserved and puzzled over this. His puzzlement was increased shortly when the steward brought cases of food and began to load them into the

lifeboat. Corky abandoned any effort at concealment then and went over to the pile of cases.

The steward nodded to him politely and finished loading. He nodded again and went aft. The foreman presently emerged from the open port, closed and locked it, saw Corky and smiled.

"Hello, there!"

"What goes on?" Corky asked. "Why all the work on this?"

"Why, uh—" The wrinkled foreman floundered for a moment. "Just routine."

"But the ship seems to be running perfectly," Corky protested. "Nobody's expecting an emergency, are they?"

"You'll have to ask the captain," the foreman said, and went away.

Corky's next stop was the engine control room.

"Come in, lad!" Sam James seemed unable to speak below the level of a shout. He waved at the panel of studs, dials and switches. "Physically unfit!" he said in derision. "All a man needs to run a good ship like *Old Standby* is a good pair of eyes and a stiff finger." He put a loving hand on a blueprint of the ship's assembly. "Treat a good ship right, lad, and she'll never let you down. Which is more than you can say of people. Now," he boomed, "what's on your mind?"

"Nothing special," Corky said. "Just wandering around. Well, it won't be long now, eh?"

"Two weeks, ship time, is all."

To Corky's shock and astonishment, Sam said this softly, so softly it was barely audible.

"So they're gonna dismantle the old space bucket," Sam went on quietly, bitterly. "This panel might wind up on a farm, and the good solid hull will be converted into a warehouse for storing grain. Grain!" he suddenly roared. "This ship that's been—"

He broke off, and his eyes took on a twinkle in which malice, mischief and triumph seemed to be mixed. "Ah, well," he said cheerfully, "there I go shooting off my face again. Don't pay any attention to it. Are you gettin' plenty of stuff to write up?"

Corky shrugged. "The usual," he said.

As he went forward to the main control room, he tried to fit into a pattern the meeting with its phony overtones, the stocking of the lifeboat, and the chief engineer's abrupt change of manner. He felt in his heart—and he could imagine Janice Lowell's sneer at the phrase—that there ought to be a pattern.

Captain Lincoln, Selden, and Lieutenant Clay were in the control room, Selden in the pilot's chair. Corky noted a certain physical tenseness in their motionlessness, as if they were waiting for something. All three flicked their eyes toward him as he entered, but nobody said anything.

The forward screen provided an explanation by filling with the image of the escort vessel's captain, a youngish man with a crisp, no-nonsense air about him.

"Approaching the Coal Sack," his voice crisped. "Stand by on *Talisman* to activate compensators."

"Aye, aye, sir," Lieutenant Clay answered, and looked expectantly at Selden as the screen blanked out.

Selden spoke into the intercom. "Stand by to fire nose rockets."

"Aye, aye, sir!" came the boom of Sam James' voice.

Lieutenant Clay frowned. "But look here," he began.

"Quiet!" Selden commanded. "This has to be done in split-seconds."

"But I protest. You're going contrary to orders."

"Mr. Clay!" Captain Lincoln snapped. "You will go to your quarters, if you can't be quiet here!"

Clay looked at the captain's steady eyes, flushed at his tone. "I submit," he said, "but under protest."

"You'll be allowed to make your protest later. Meanwhile, carry on as if we were obeying your commander's orders. Do you understand clearly, Mr. Clay?"

This sentence was so laden with menace that Corky shivered.

"Yes, sir," Clay muttered.

The screen came to life. "Ready with compensators!"

"Ready, sir," Selden said.

The escort commander said, "Minus five seconds . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . Zero!"

Selden touched a button. Rockets sputtered briefly and Corky could feel the shift in course.

"We're through," Selden said. He waved at the forward viewing screen. "There she is!"

CHAPTER III

Eluding the Astrolite

IN THE cross-hairs of the screen was a twinkling blue dot far ahead—the sun of Silvor.

"Right on the nose," Captain Lincoln said in a complimentary tone. "But I don't see the escort vessel."

"Compensators!" Selden snorted.

"Now," said Lieutenant Clay, flushed and grim, "may I have an explanation of this extraordinary behavior?"

"Certainly," Captain Lincoln said. "For reasons which I don't care to discuss at the moment, we wanted to get ahead of the escort cruiser *Astrolite*. The compensators, designed to offset aberrations in instruments caused by the peculiar radiations in the Coal Sack, also have a slowing effect. We simply took a short-cut and are ahead of the escort."

"But that's impossible!"

Captain Lincoln waved at the screen. "I think you'll agree she isn't ahead of us. Not only that," he went on, "but she is probably veering off course in an attempt to adjust her relationship to us in space. We're supposed to be behind her. When we suddenly appear in a new position, it's going to be confusing."

"Oh, well," said Seldon, "what's one escort, more or less? We're on our own, now."

This last was full of thinly veiled glee, and pilot and captain exchanged a secret, knowing glance.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor and Corky moved out of the entranceway, for the cook. "Cookie"—Corky never heard his given name—was gray and wrinkled like the rest of the ship's official company. He came to a halt just inside and sketched a salute.

"I regret to report, Captain," he said, scratching an ear, "that we're short on food."

Captain Lincoln's eyes sparkled. "Why? You were in charge of loading."

"Yeah, but—" Cookie looked both unhappy and defiant. "I hadn't counted on an inspection, like the councilwoman ordered. While we were gettin' inspected, either they didn't load the rest of the supplies or else somebody stole 'em."

"How short are we?"

"Well, I figure I can feed us at the present rate about ten more meals."

Captain Lincoln was thoughtfully silent, apparently making computations in his head. He went to the intercom, spoke into it.

"Engine room?"

"Yes, sir," came Sam James' answering voice.

"Can you give us more speed?"

"More, Captain? We've got to turn ship soon and start deceleration."

"Yes, Chief," the captain said impatiently, "but that's ninety-six hours away at our present speed. Can you cut that down to seventy-two?"

"I can try, sir. Let's hope the port tubes don't burn out."

"Very well, increase to maximum." Captain Lincoln turned back to Cookie. "Two meals in each twenty-four-hour period from now on. If we're hungry the last several days," he went on, with the trace of a smile, "it won't be anything new."

"Yes, sir," the cook said, and turned away.

"Wait a minute," Corky said, and the cook halted. "What about that emergency supply of food that's in the life-boat? Why can't we use that?"

The cook looked at him coldly. "That's no emergency supply," he said, and departed.

"That will be all, Mr. McKorkle," Cap-

tain Lincoln said. "You have permission to return to the lounge."

CORKY went, more mixed up than ever. Captain Lincoln had admitted he wanted to lose the escort vessel. Why would they want to lose it? Its main purpose was to provide transportation back to Earth after *Old Standby* was disposed of. So, if they wanted to lose it, they didn't intend to return to Earth.

Was Captain Lincoln trying to escape the escort? He had effectively done so, but was still headed straight for the official destination. That must mean that he intended to land there, and his instructions to the cook bore that out.

But then, why stock the lifeboat? Its only purpose was to provide a means of escape from a dangerous condition. That condition was still in the future.

Corky snapped his fingers as he saw a possible explanation. Suppose they set *Old Standby* in an orbit around Silvor, make her a satellite of the planet, damaged beyond repair, and quietly stole away. What a joke! For an untold number of years the ship would ride far out in the heavens, a monument to her own glorious history.

A monument, too, to the will of the people. The public protest at the proposed junking of the most famous space vessel of all would have new significance. The chuckles that would go up would be heard all over the System.

Corky let out a chuckle of his own at how foolish the Executive Council would look, trying to figure a way to land a ship without power in heavy gravity.

That was only one theory, of course, but it seemed to fit the facts as he knew them, including the swift exchange of looks between captain and pilot when they decided the escort was off course.

Councilwoman Lowell entered the lounge then, and Corky got politely to his feet. He decided to let her in on his cogitating. She, after all, was in technical charge, and it might be amusing to see what would happen when she ordered Captain Lincoln to institute a search. If he defied her, Corky would

bet twenty to one his theory was correct.

"It was a good escort while it lasted," he said.

"I beg your pardon?" she said with cold politeness, which seemed to Corky to be her phrase in trade. Too bad, he thought, that she didn't have a personality to go with that exterior.

He told her about the escort vessel. "Seems that the gadgets didn't work and she's in a fast curve to nowhere."

"But that's impossible!"

"It seems to me that when a thing has happened, it isn't impossible."

"A search, of course, has been instituted." This was a statement, not a question.

"Remember my telling you about my—uh—intuitions?" Corky inquired lazily. "Well, I got another one. I don't think a search is."

"Nonsense!" she said, and went out. Corky tagged along.

IT WAS a flushed and sullen young face that Lieutenant Clay presented to the small group in the control room. He looked, Corky thought, as if he'd just been spanked and didn't approve. He raised his eyes from the deck as Janice Lowell entered, flushed even deeper, and looked away.

"Have you found our escort yet?" Miss Lowell demanded.

"Escort *Astrolite* calling *Talisman*!" the overhead speaker squawked. "Come in, Lieutenant Clay! Come in, please."

Captain Lincoln answered Janice Lowell's question. "Haven't looked, ma'am."

"Why don't you answer that call, and why isn't your screen activated?"

"Miss Lowell," the captain said, "this is going to come as a shock to you. I don't choose to answer."

"This is insubordination, Captain, and shall be so reported."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I demand an explanation, sir!"

Captain Lincoln sighed. "More people demanding explanations. Lieutenant Clay has had his, and is under technical arrest." He sighed again. "I sup-

pose I'll have to do the same to you."

"But you are subject to my orders, Captain!" she said firmly.

"But how are you going to enforce them, ma'am? If I choose to go contrary to your wishes or orders, I have a crew to back me up. Also, I am the only person aboard who is allowed to carry arms. So you see, quite aside from the tradition which says a captain is the law on his own ship, I can do just about as I please."

"And just what do you please?" she asked coldly, haughtily.

"Why, I'm going to give *Old Standby* a decent burial ma'am, as befits a good ship that has meant so much to us who have flown her for thirty years."

He cut off her reply with a raised hand. "Wait. Miss Lowell, you're too young to have felt this, but we of this ship have affection and respect for her every atom. We're a pretty ordinary bunch of men, with ordinary training, and this ship has made us famous.

"Oh, yes, it was the ship," he went on. "Make no mistake about that. She would have done the same for any crew who loved and admired her as we have. Always, when we wanted just one more surge of power, she had it. Always, when we needed shelter and protection for our very lives, she had it and gave it."

Captain Lincoln waved at the control board. "Take that assembly there. Mr. Selden has had that apart many times, Miss Lowell, keeping it in the very best of condition, so that no circuit should be faulty when it's needed. And ma'am, when you watched his big hands moving so gently among the parts of that panel, you'd think it was his own baby he was handling.

"The same with Sam Jones. All that power he works with isn't just blind force. It's something alive to him, something that answers when he calls. And you should see him working on one of the converters—you expect it to grow a tail and wag it every time he touches it.

"So, Miss Lowell, do you think we want some bookkeeper to get a part of that control assembly? Do you think we

like the idea of some government farm using Sam's converters? They can have our heads first!"

"Very interesting," Janice Lowell said coolly. "And poetic. But what do you propose to do?"

"When we turn ship and start our decelerating fall to Silvor, we'll aim for the Banding Sea. I'll show you on a chart, if you don't know where it is. Then we'll all take off in the lifeboat and let *Old Standby* find her grave in the deepest part of the ocean. I'm taking the responsibility; I'll take the consequences."

"I see. And meanwhile?"

"Meanwhile, carry on."

"Very well, Captain Lincoln. But I assure you that you'll hear more about this."

"You may as well relax, Miss Lowell. You can't change the situation."

"If I could get my hands on that transmitter—" she said.

"But you can't, ma'am. And it wouldn't do any good. The escort may be so far off course that she can never reach Silvor by the time we do. But it doesn't matter. I'd still save *Old Standby*."

"Save?" she said.

The intercom spoke with the voice of Sam James. "Control room, attention. Port tubes have gone."

"What can we do about it, Chief?" the captain asked.

"Why do anything Captain? We can slow her down with what we've got. All we're going to do is sink her. Are the Boy Scouts still with us?"

"No." Captain Lincoln smiled.

"Good!" boomed the voice from the intercom.

CHAPTER IV

Standing by for Rescue

THEY turned ship and began the slowing drop toward the planet, which began gradually to assume a blue,

oval shape. The meetings at mealtimes were painful and silent affairs. Janice Lowell and Lieutenant Clay sometimes spoke to each other in monosyllables, but did not address anyone else.

Calls from the escort ship grew farther apart until they were heard over the ship's monitoring system only once in each twenty-four-hour period.

Everybody was mildly hungry all the time.

Janice Lowell, much to Corky's surprise, sought his advice when they were some one hundred twenty hours away from destination.

I was wrong. Official orders don't mean anything out here. Character and emotions carry much more weight. But go ahead, finish your gloating, and we'll talk."

"I'm not going to gloat. You want *Old Standby* delivered for junking, as ordered by your Council. Right?"

"It's such a waste, otherwise," she said. "I didn't make the policy. I'm along only to see that it's adhered to. The colony on Silvor needs metal and machinery. Wouldn't the ship serve a much better purpose if its parts were used rather than allowed to rust away?"

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"I'd like to talk to you," she said, without any of the hauteur he had come to believe was her natural manner.

Corky beamed.

"Delighted!"

She led the way into the lounge from the corridor where he had been walking for exercise.

"I must do something about this situation," she began abruptly, "and I want you to help me."

Corky raised his eyebrows. "What can you do?"

"I don't know," she said despondently. "I thought you might have an idea. One of your—er—intuitions."

"This is something of a change in attitude, Miss Lowell."

"All right," she said in a resigned voice. "Rub it in. You were right and

"I grant you it would be more useful, if not as sentimental or spectacular," Corky agreed. "But I don't think you can talk Captain Lincoln into it. Tell you what, though. We might sound out Sam James. If you apologized for your cracks about his physical fitness, he may soften up and tell you how much chance you have of getting your way."

"I'll do anything," she said. "Let's go see him."

Sam thawed as Miss Lowell ate humble pie, and listened gravely to her argument on waste in contradistinction to usefulness. Then he shook his gray-ing head.

"It's impossible, Miss Lowell. Even if the crew would agree, which they won't, we couldn't pull out of our present course with the port tubes burned out."

"Couldn't they be replaced?" she pleaded.

Sam considered this. "No," he said finally. "It's not easy to make repairs like that in space, and we're crowded for time in any case."

The monitor, set in a bulkhead, suddenly came to life.

"Attention, all ships! This is the cruiser *Astrolite*. We have burned out our drive assembly attempting to reach the planet Silvor. We are out of control. We shall continue to operate our carrier wave as long as possible, so that any vessel within hearing may establish our position. Our situation is desperate!"

The voice cut out, leaving a hum. Sam's intercom brought a query from Captain Lincoln.

"Engine room, attention. Can we do anything?"

"We can try," Chief James replied. "Send the machine-shop crew to the after-port lock with spare tubes, welding equipment, belt magnets and suits. We'll have to work outside. Send Pilot Selden down here to stand watch. We'll have to work fast, Captain."

He switched off, turned to Corky. "Get a suit out of that locker and help me into it." When Sam had struggled into the suit, before putting on his helmet, he said, "Now push me to the lock, quick."

Corky ran along the main corridor, shoving the wheel chair before him. The machine-shop crew was there, donning suits.

"Strap a magnet on me," Sam said. "Two of you carry me through the lock, and I'm on my own."

He fastened his helmet in place, and the four men disappeared into the air lock.

Corky looked at Janice Lowell. "We may as well go to the control room. We're helpless here."

CAPTAIN LINCOLN was at the direction finder, marking a blank graph. Lieutenant Clay was in the pilot's seat. Neither noticed the entrance of Corky and Miss Lowell.

The intercom came on with Selden's

voice. "I'm going to put the starboard drive on full. Watch swing indicator until it reaches thirty. Hold it steady with port nose jets until swing is zero. Then hold it."

"Aye, aye, sir," Lieutenant Clay answered.

Corky watched the dial which registered the attempt to pull away from Silvor on a tangent. He watched it as if he were responsible for the operation, and he stiffened a hand as if to fire the nose jets as the needle moved over. He noticed his tension and forced himself to relax. The intercom now began to bring a verbal picture of the group working outside in the black cold of space.

"Here, Chief, let me do that."

"Tend to your own job," the voice of Sam James growled. "I've got two good arms, haven't I? More hydrogen in the torch."

"It's starting, Chief."

"Give a hand here. Out she comes!"

Corky touched Janice Lowell on the arm. She jumped, turned to him, and then relaxed. With a jerk of his head, he motioned her toward the corridor.

"Whatever happens will come to us in here," he said when they reached the lounge.

Miss Lowell waved at the viewport. "Helpless," she said, "in that blackness and cold. It must be awful!"

"Air, I suppose, would be the biggest problem," Corky observed. "Or maybe cold, I don't know. Maybe you'd freeze to death before suffocating. I don't think you could use the air conditioner with the power assembly out, but you couldn't use heat, either. In any case, you would wind up frozen stiff."

Janice Lowell shuddered. "Please! Do you think there's a chance?"

Corky shrugged. "You heard what Sam said. It seems to be a matter of time. Poor guys. . . ."

"Who?" she demanded.

"The captain, Sam, the crew. They had the big gesture all set. They were thumbing their noses at the Executive Council. Now those dopes in the escort have messed everything up. Sheer sentiment, that's what!"

"All you do is confuse me," she said uncertainly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Well, you saw the response to a distress call. Almost an automatic reflex. Sentiment, pride in their ship caused the crew to go against orders. And pride in their ship makes them junk their scheme the minute somebody's in trouble, even the guys who were to enforce the policy orders. Sentiment. Uncontrolled emotion, which," he quoted maliciously, "has no place in intelligent life forms."

She flushed. "I deserve that, I guess. Look, I can't stand this waiting. I'm going to my cabin. If anything happens, will you bang on my door?"

Corky sat alone in the lounge and listened to the fragmentary comments which told of progress outside. He dozed off once and slept for more than an hour. A second distress call from the *Astrolite* brought him awake for a few moments.

He was hungry, but knew that no attempt would be made to serve meals until the issue was settled one way or another.

"Engine room, attention," Sam James' voice said. "Stand by to test port tubes."

The order was acknowledged.

"All right, boys," James went on. "It's a makeshift, but maybe it'll work. Engine room, let's have it!"

Corky felt the sudden backward pull of acceleration.

"Everything reads okay here, Chief," Selden's voice said.

"All right. We're coming aboard."

Corky called Janice Lowell and they went into the control room, where Captain Lincoln was giving Lieutenant Clay

the interception course.

"I guess you win after all, Miss Lowell," Lincoln said. "But first, we'll have to return the crew of the *Astrolite* to Earth."

Janice Lowell leaned against the edge of the chart desk and crossed one foot over the other. Her eyes twinkled a little.

"It may be weakness on my part, Captain," she drawled, "but I've developed quite a healthy respect for sentiment in the last few hours. It has a great power, I think. And I believe that when *Old Standby* returns to Earth, having performed another rescue on what was supposed to be her voyage to the scrap heap, public sentiment won't let her be sent back again for junking."

She paused for a moment, as if marshaling unfamiliar ideas into line.

"Especially," she went on, with a small grin at Corky, "when that public feeling is aroused by Mr. McKorkle's reportorial genius. Finally, I'd like to point out that I have a voice on the Council. Taking it all in all, Captain, I don't think you need worry about the final disposition of your ship."

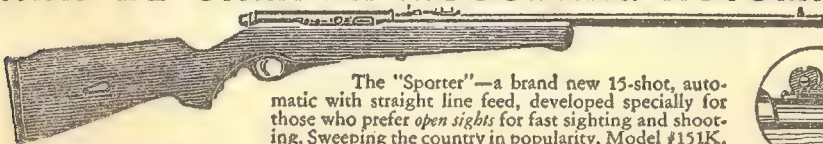
Captain Lincoln made a bow and spoke into the intercom. "Galley, attention. You may serve our meal now, Cookie. But only one meal each twenty-four hours until further orders. I hope," he added, turning back to Janice, "the *Astrolite* has plenty of food."

He activated his transmitter. "Calling the cruiser *Astrolite*. Come in, please."

The screen filled with the escort commander's face. "Thank God!" he said. "Where are you? Who are you?"

"S.S. *Talisman* standing by for rescue operation!"

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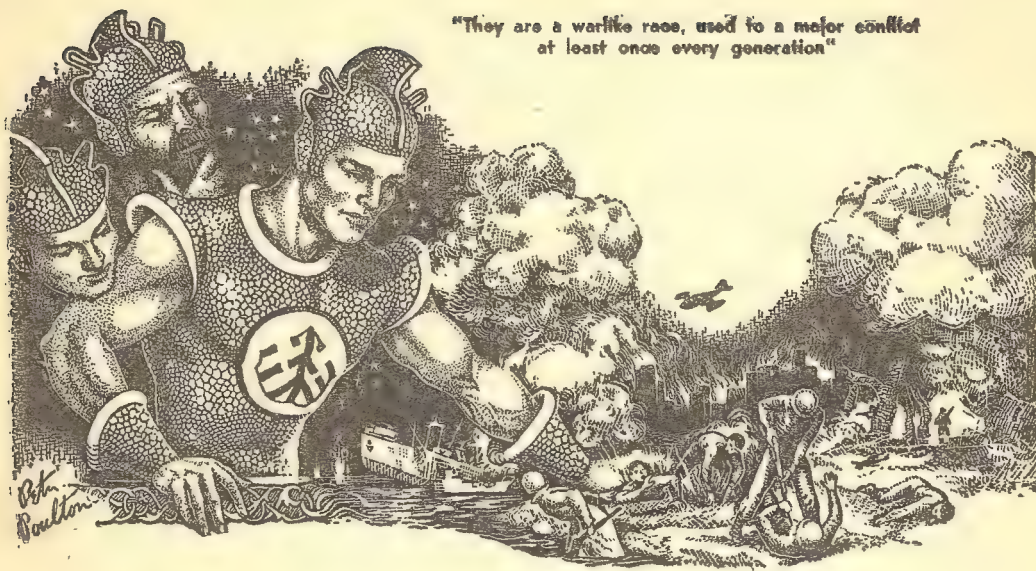
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THE SPARK

By MACK REYNOLDS

The High Council of Five takes up the problem of Terra!

BY THIS time the High Council of Five had given up hope—it could be observed in their attitude—but the conference was one which had taken years of preparation, so it continued.

The Presidor said wearily, "Comrades, we will now hear the report of Ethnologist Chhan."

Chhan entered through the heavy portal and saluted the five councilors with the respect consistent with their rank. He was elderly, bent with his years of study, and his expression indicated that his message was not one of hope.

The Presidor returned the salutation and said, "Ethnologist Chhan, you were to investigate the possibilities of establishing peaceable relationship with the inhabitants of Terra."

"Councilors," the old man said sadly, "there can be no peace with the inhabitants of the planet Terra. They are a young race, still in their ethical infancy in spite of their rapid advance in the sciences. I—"

One of the five interrupted him. "A previous report to the High Council recommended that we attempt to contact the Terrans and request permission to migrate to their planet until we have found means to reach the nearer stars. When science had progressed to the point where migration to some planet beyond the solar system became practical, we would resume our way, leaving them in sole possession of this system."

"It was suggested," the Presidor added hopefully, "that in some respects our science is in advance of Terra's and

that in return for their hospitality we could teach them—”

Chhan gestured in negation. “Councilors, the recommendation of which you speak is obviously the most reasonable solution to our problem, but it would be impossible to make such an agreement with the Terrans.”

“But why?”

“In spite of their progress in so many lines of endeavor, they are as savages in others. For instance, Councilors, they are divided into races, into nations, into classes, into religious groups, that are continually at odds with each other. Not one year goes by but hundreds of thousands, or even millions, are killed because of these divisions.

“If they are capable of springing at each other’s throats because of a difference in skin coloring, or a difference in their religious beliefs, do you think we could safely remain among them for a period of any length at all? No, Councilors, I am convinced that the day the Terrans discovered there was another intelligent life form in the solar system, that day they would begin their preparations to destroy us.

“We of Mars, as they call our planet, are mature enough to conduct a peaceful relationship with an alien life form,” he concluded, “but the Terrans cannot even remain at peace among themselves.”

AFTER Chhan had left, the High Council of Five sat in silence for a long period.

Finally the Presidor said, “After all, Comrades, we had already suspected the truth before Ethnologist Chhan’s report. Let us proceed. We will now hear the eminent Physicist Burl.”

The physicist’s face held the same lack of hope that the Five had become used to as the conference had progressed. He came immediately to the point.

“Councilors,” he reported, “the Terrans are on the verge of attaining space travel. Within the past few years their experiments have progressed unbelievably. You will recall that it was

during their recent war that we first noted the use of rockets, and, toward the end of that conflict the development of explosives based on nuclear fission.

“Now several of the Terran nations are rushing experiments that will have space stations—artificial satellites—circling their planet in a matter of months,” he went on. “Already at least one nation has sent experimental rockets beyond the Earth’s atmosphere, and we can expect an attempt on their part to reach Luna in a few years at most. I need not remark upon the significance of these advances of theirs. Once they reach Luna, they will be capable of progressing to our own planet.”

The scientist cleared his throat before finishing his report. “Councilors, my prediction is that the inhabitants of Terra can be expected to land on Mars within five years.”

With that, he bowed and departed the council chamber.

“We have but one more report, Comrades,” the Presidor told his colleagues. “It is almost unnecessary to hear it, but for the sake of the records I shall now call upon our—” his facial expression was wry “—our military authority, Specialist Kaden.”

The newcomer was young and erect of bearing, but even he reflected the age of a race that had grown old before Earth’s Mesozoic period. He saluted the councilors gravely and waited for their command.

“As you know, Specialist Kaden,” the Presidor said, “this conference has been called to consider a double problem. First our race must leave this dying planet if it is to survive. Every year that passes sees new necessity for cutting down our population, for placing ever tighter restrictions on those that are left. We must find means to leave or soon our life form will be lost.

“The second problem is that of the Terrans, who are on the verge of space travel. The conference has concluded that peace with the Terrans is impossible, and that as soon as this aggressive race discovers our presence in the solar system they will attack.

"It is obvious that our two problems are related. We of Mars have not as yet reached a point where we are capable of traveling to a different solar system. If we are to migrate, it can only be to a sister planet. The only practical one, of course, is Terra."

The Presidor hesitated a moment before saying, "You are to report on the possibilities of a conflict between Terra and Mars."

The younger man gestured negatively, almost contemptuously.

"Councilors," he said, "the situation is almost laughable! War with Terra? Conflict between this dying planet and that young one? Forgive me, I am wrong. The situation is tragic, not humorous!"

"Very briefly, Councilors, Terra has a military potential a thousand times as great as ours," he explained. "Their population numbers at least two billions, ours approximately half a million. Their industrial machine is tremendous, unbelievably so. Our planet cannot even provide the metals and fuels necessary for our own uses, not to speak of devoting them to war."

"One of their most recent weapons is based on nuclear fission, and at least two of their nations have accumulated stockpiles of these terrible bombs. But if we devoted all of our resources to the effort, we could build only *one* of these. We know how, Councilors, but we do not possess the raw materials."

"In some respects our science is beyond theirs and possibly we could devise some weapon that would wreak havoc among them. But when they turned back our attack and countered—" Specialist Kaden made the Martian gesture of negation again. "It is fantastic! Either of their major nations could defeat us—it would not even take a united Terra."

"Above all, Councilors," he added, "they are a warlike race, used to a ma-

jor conflict at least once every generation. And we? We have not had warfare on Mars in ten thousand years. It would be difficult, I am afraid, for us to learn the ways of slaughter. They are already familiar with them."

KADEN fell silent and stood watching them. Finally, the Presidor said heavily, "Then there is no possibility of preservation of our race?"

"I did not say that."

The five looked at him in surprise.

"I don't believe we understand you," the Presidor said, frowning.

"There is one possibility," the younger Martian said.

For the first time, fire gleamed in his eyes. The members of the High Council leaned forward slightly. "We are listening," the Presidor snapped.

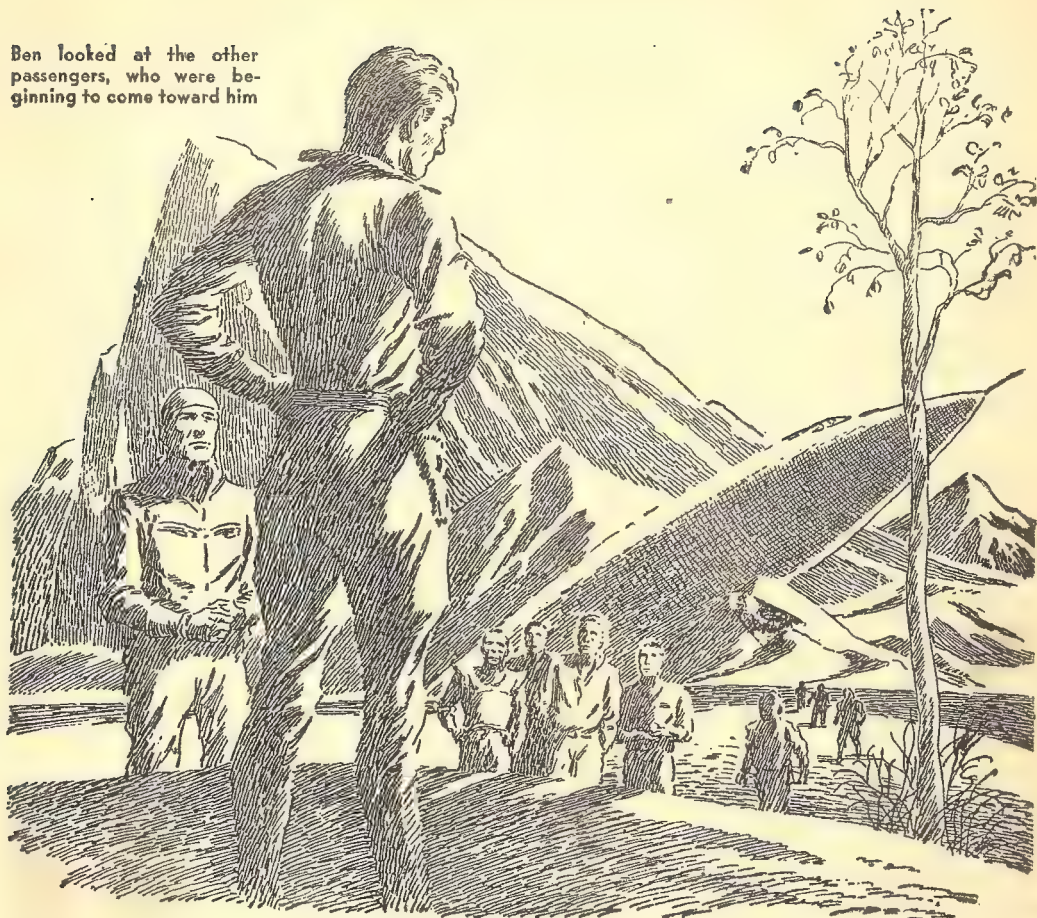
"Councilors," Kaden explained, "according to the radio emanations from Terra, and according to the spy craft we have flown about their planet, there exists a situation which may be to our advantage. Terra is divided today into two camps. The two dominant nations, which occupy different hemispheres, are in a *cold war* as they call it. Each, with its allies, is preparing feverishly for possible conflict. Each has prepared weapons beyond description in their terribleness. Each waits for an overt act on the part of the other. Such an act would have them at each other's throats."

The Presidor frowned. "I do not seem to see the connection with our predicament."

"Councilors, we have the materials to build one fission bomb," Kaden said. "That is all we will need. I suggest we build it and, secretly, drop it on one of Terra's major cities. Any city. It makes no difference. When they have destroyed each other, as they will, we of Mars will be able to land!"

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Ben looked at the other passengers, who were beginning to come toward him



Chore for a Spaceman

By WALT SHELDON

*Harlow hated himself for being only a Space Steward,
but when disaster struck—he alone knew the answers!*

THEY came through hatch looking bored, as they always did, and once again Ben Harlow dreaded facing them. They'd seen it all out there in Interplan. They had it.

And now he had to make his silly speech—to them.

Captain Mace pushed by, headed for Control. He clapped Ben's shoulders. He was hulking, red-headed and mostly grin and muscle. "Fix 'm up good, Ben. Dies aboard this trip."

"Dies?"

"Damned Interesting Characters."

The Captain and his grin disappeared forward.

Ben laughed but his heart wasn't in it. He turned to the passengers and cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, you are now guests of Military Space Transport. Our destination is Earth and during the time we are headed there . . ."

The stilted words, the wooden words. He'd said them so many times they cloyed his ears now. Ben Harlow—Space Steward, second class—the man who had never seen the swirling poisonous clouds of Venus or the unholy glow of Saturnian rings outside the ports. Never the dark side of the Moon. Just a bare spaceport on Mars, and the New Mexico landing area on Earth.

This was his life while Earth and Jupiter warred and others filled themselves with glory.

" . . . We hope, of course, there'll be no emergencies. As far as we know the Mars-inferior area is clear of Jovian craft. But in case anything does happen . . ."

The instructions about the liferoids now. Move quickly, stay calm. He was telling them—the men who'd seen the real thing. *Them.*

There was one over there skirting space madness—eyes too big for his face and he kept swallowing his Adam's apple over and over again. Spaceman first class Eddington—Ben recalled his name from the Form 6. Then the man from Telenews, leaning forward, staring at nothing and dangling his camera between his knees, the pale, grey little man who had maybe seen too much. Beyond him two space guards—rugged flat-staring weary bulls of men—with their prisoner.

BEN'S gaze stopped on the prisoner. It was the first Jovian he had ever seen at close range. In the artificial gravity which matched Earth's he had made himself tall and elongated. He had worked his protoplasmic form into the shape of an Earthman. They were the Jovians—the shameless imitators. The color stripes on this one marked him as one of their space pilots.

" . . . so if you have any questions don't hesitate to ask them. Military Space Transport will try to make your trip to Earth as quick and comfortable as possible."

The whirring began as the blast-off energy was generated. Ben went down the line, checking the straps of the acceleration cradles. The nose of the ship rose slowly into launching position and when the ship's gravity was switched on the sensation of tilting disappeared.

Ben came to the Jovian, and began to tighten his straps. He looked up and saw a grin cross the mushy face. The prisoner kept himself in Earthman's shape by strict order—and by threat of one of the guards' acid guns.

Only acid from one of the squat hard spiky Jovian plants could hurt a Jovian—that or something violent like an explosion. Bullets or rays passed through their protoplasm harmlessly. Ben looked away from the Jovian's grin. He tried not to shudder.

"Just relax when the acceleration warning bell rings," he muttered. His litany. Same trips, same kinds of faces, same words all the time. Combat men—going back. Only the Jovian made this run a little different.

He stole another glance upward. The Jovian was still grinning at him. This time he did shudder. You had to shudder, just thinking about them. Jovians had no bones, no innards. They were just blobs of stuff. Within the tremendous gravity of their own planet they spread themselves flat on the surface or formed hemispheres.

They could take any form they wished within several hours. They could make clever pseudodactyls for fingers and then duplicate almost anything made in the system. They'd copied Earth's spaceships, Earth's weapons—and now Earth's old talent for war.

The Jovian's pseudo-voice came, sleazy and whispering, to Ben's ears. He used the manner and jargon of an Earthman space pilot. "Kid, you got no idea what a hot space-rock this little boy is. Me, I've pfted more Earth guys than Beethoven has notes."

Ben didn't answer and didn't look up. The Jovian laughed. "You squares won't be holding Xyl very long."

Ben heard one of the beefy guards growl, "Shut up, Xyl."

Then the warning note sounded and Ben finished his checkup quickly. He hustled forward to the crew compartment and his own acceleration chamber. He ticked on the interviz and saw Captain Mace's battered mug grinning at him.

He said, "All clear back there, sir."

"Hang on, kiddo," said Mace. Then his image vanished.

Mace had had it, too. He'd been in battle-hulls before the Space Surgeon sent him to transports. He had medals he never wore—a spacebag full.

Ben relaxed in the floating web of straps and springs. The starting bell rang hollowly. The usual terrible roar cut into the silence. It became louder and louder until Ben thought—as he always did—that he wouldn't be able to stand it any longer. Then it drifted away.

He felt himself pressed into the cradle and felt the characteristic stomach tug. His head swam. He knew that the ship was already far into space. . . .

Moments later his head cleared again and the cradle swung back to center. He waited quietly until he heard the clear bell, then extricated himself and went through the door to the waist. He glanced at the passengers, and all were more or less normal.

The little, grey Telenews man was already lighting a cigarette. The two space guards were stretching themselves and Xyl was staring at his straps, wondering how to undo them with his pseudodactyls and probably wishing he could change form instantaneously to get out of them. Most of the others were stirring in one way or another. A bridge game was being started toward the rear.

WAIT—Eddington the gaunt Spaceman 1/c was still strapped down. Ben frowned and started toward him. Then he saw that he was perfectly conscious. His eyes were moving. He

was staring at the Jovian prisoner. Unmistakable slow burning hate was in his eyes.

Ben went to him. "Feeling all right, fella?"

The starved eyes swung slowly until they fastened on Ben's. Ben felt worse in moments like this when combat men looked at him and studied him. He knew what they saw—a medium-sized guy in a blue spaceman's uniform with the vanes of rocket personnel on his chest.

Grey eyes, sandy hair, faintly freckled face. But none of that hardness around the jaw—none of those space wrinkles near the eyes. It was pretty clear what he really was—a spacegoing headwaiter. That was about the size of it.

And this gaunt stringy-cheeked Eddington said to him, "Look, buddy, go take a walk for yourself. I'm busy." Then he resumed staring at the Jovian.

"You don't like him, eh?" said Ben.

Eddington spoke softly. "I hate 'em. I hate all of 'em. Like you could never understand. I did two Earth years in one of their prisons. Their slimy arms poking all over me, cutting me open sometimes and—and—" He swallowed his larynx. He looked at Ben again. "Go on, beat it, will ya?"

Ben shrugged and turned, went forward again.

It was very puzzling for a man to know how he should feel. He knew about the Jovians—second hand, of course—and he shuddered like everybody else when he heard about the things they did to prisoners. But was it cruelty? They had no conception of pain—no real emotions outside of dim hate and a kind of heavy humor. The only thing they feared was death—and they were never quite articulate enough to explain just exactly why they feared that.

The thing was complicated enough for a philosopher, let alone a two-bit space steward.

He went into Control and saw Captain Mace and the co-pilot, Lieutenant Washam, at the panel. He stepped to the galley to make coffee. He couldn't

get Eddington off his mind. The gaunt veteran was up to something, something troublesome, only Ben didn't know exactly what to do about it.

He glanced through the plastibubble and looked at all the blackness of space, the pinpoints of stars. Worlds to conquer—the Jovian war had already brought about the development of photo-corpuscular power, and there were whispers that Space Force ships had made it beyond Pluto. A whole Universe to be met and grappled with—

And here stood Ben Harlow, making coffee. He shook his head bitterly.

"Ben," Captain Mace called abruptly. "You got a minute?"

"Yes, sir?" Ben looked up from the hot plate. Mace was beckoning. He went over to the panel as Lieutenant Washam, who was young and blond and very poised and correct, took over the controls.

Mace swiveled around in his chair. He was still grinning but his eyes were serious. "Ben, I don't want you to worry, or anything like that—but you'd better know that a Viz came in from patrol headquarters a few minutes ago. So you can be ready to take care of the passengers, just in case."

"What was the Viz about, Captain?"

Mace jerked his thumb at space in general. "Couple of Jovian fighters slipped in through Mars-inferior. That's the report, anyway. The teledars are fingering for 'em now."

Ben smiled dryly. "Be just my luck never even to get a look at a Jovian fighter."

"You'd like to see a little action, huh?" Mace's grin almost disappeared and he looked at Ben very steadily. "It's no fun, Ben. Space-war is no fun at all."

"I know that," Ben said. "I can figure about how bad it is. Just the same—"

"Don't ever look for it," Mace said earnestly. "Don't ever."

Ben didn't answer. He just looked back. Mace met his stare for a moment or so, then swung around to the controls again. Ben went back to the galley.

The transport roared through space.

Its rockets flamed and the red disc of Mars behind it became a spot. Earth and Mars were degrees out of conjunction now and the ship cross-orbited. The bright, golden blob of the sun was to the left and had the usual illusory look of moving in a trajectory across the heavens.

After awhile Ben made supper, filled the first tray and pushed back into the passenger compartment with it. The group looked quiet enough, content enough. The four bridge players still sat cross-legged in the after portion. Several viewed minifilms in their laps. The Telenews man wrote silently on a small steno-machine. The beefy guards were smoking. Xyl, the Jovian prisoner, had his leg forms drawn up between his arms and sat with the guards, grinning at everybody and everything.

Eddington was on the edge of his bunk—on the very edge. He was glaring across the aisle at the Jovian. He moved only his fingers, resting them along the lock of his space-bag and drumming them steadily.

Ben frowned at him for a moment, then began to pass out the food. A dish and a knife and a fork to each man. No tasteless concentrates or synthetics on transport ships—this was a cushy job, a soft job. Out there in Interplan right now gaunt raw-nerved men were swearing because they had to live on pills.

Ben glanced back at Eddington every once in awhile. It was an instinct as much as anything that told Ben something wasn't quite right—maybe it was just long subconscious understanding of human behavior in these surroundings. Anyway he felt compelled to do this.

THAT was how it happened that he saw Eddington open his space bag, lean forward, crouch and reach into it with his eyes still on the Jovian across the aisle.

Ben moved fast. He whirled, knocking his supper tray on a stanchion and spilling it all over a non-rated Colonel with a clipped white mustache. He sprang down the aisle and across it. He

still didn't know exactly what Eddington was up to—he didn't have to know exactly. The look in the man's smoking eyes was enough.

He reached Eddington at about the time Eddington reached the Jovian. The thin spaceman had moved with hungry animal speed—too fast for the big space guards. They'd been staring out the ports, paying little attention, keyed only to move if the prisoner tried something funny. They weren't expecting trouble from across the aisle, from one of their own guys.

Ben slammed into Eddington's shoulder and knocked him aside. He remembered that in that moment a kind of insane laugh came from the Jovian.

Eddington found his balance again and turned and faced Ben. His eyes were wider. The lids had peeled back showing the dead-white cornea around the dark pupils. It seemed that his face was nothing but eyes.

He said to Ben, "Why, you lousy little rear-line punk!"

Ben looked at him quietly, looked at the thing in his hand and then back into his eyes again and said, "Take it easy, Eddington."

One of the space guards started to get up.

Ben said, "I'll handle it."

The space guard grunted and sat down again.

"One of these chicken-livered guys, huh?" Eddington said to Ben. "Love the Jovians. Love everybody. National be-kind-to-the-enemy week. Yeah, I know."

"Eddington, you'd better sit down and take it easy," said Ben.

Eddington took a step forward. He dropped the thing in his hand, and it clattered on the floor. He said, "I know your kind, brother."

"Careful, Eddington," said Ben.

Eddington came at him, swinging. His left came first in a wide loop and Ben stepped inside of it. Ben wasn't much of a boxer. He didn't like fighting either. It choked him up inside and usually made him feel sick afterward.

But he lashed out just the same. He had to. It was his job. This thing hap-

pening right here, right now, was just an extension of his job. He felt his fist slam into Eddington's midsection. He felt the force of the blow all the way up to his elbow.

Eddington whooshed with pain but his right was already on its way, following the left-handed swing Ben had caught on his shoulder. The right struck Ben's cheek. Ben heard a sound—*clok!*—in his own head and for just an instant his vision blurred. But it was surprising how little actual pain there was to the blow. Maybe later it would hurt. Right now it seemed only annoying.

Meanwhile Eddington, face twisted with agony, was falling back from the punch to his middle. Ben swung an uppercut at the man's sharp chin. It missed. Eddington saw him off balance and jabbed at his face. The jab smashed Ben's lips against his teeth and his teeth cut the lips on the inside. But it didn't blur things as the last one had. That midsection punch had taken something out of Eddington.

Ben braced himself and cocked his right fist as a man cocks a pistol for firing. He fired the fist at Eddington.

He knew the instant it landed that it would do the trick. There was that kind of a solid final sound to it. And the pain in his knuckles and up along his forearm was excruciating.

Eddington, quietly and without a twitch or gesture, fell flat on his face.

BEN stared at his skinned knuckles. He held his right fist in his left hand and stood there for a moment, breathing hard. Then he looked around. The other passengers were still silent. They merely sat and stared at what had happened. No exclamations, no congratulations, no approval or disapproval, not even a whispered comment. Not much of a fight to them, Ben supposed. They had seen worse, much worse.

He heard the deep voice of one of the space guards. Speaking to the prisoner. "Sit down, you."

He turned and looked and saw that Xyl had tried to get up. Xyl was staring at Ben. For just a passing instant it

seemed to Ben that there was a kind of gratitude in the Jovian's eyes. But that was impossible, he guessed. According to all the dope he'd ever heard Jovians didn't feel things like gratitude.

Ben lifted and then dropped his shoulders in something akin to a shrug. He looked down and saw that Eddington was stirring, moaning. He stepped past Eddington, and retrieved the thing he'd dropped. Then he moved forward again and stood with his legs spread and waited for consciousness to come back to the gaunt spaceman.

Eddington finally made it to his hands and knees. He rested like that with his face toward the floor. He shook his head and spat several times. Then he looked up and glared at Ben.

Ben said, "Don't do it again, Eddington—do you hear me? Don't do it again?"

Eddington blinked and didn't answer. Ben turned to go forward. He'd need methiolate for those knuckle scratches and maybe Eddington could use some of the stuff in the first-aid kit, too.

He might behave after this or he might not—he was on the edge of a kind of madness, no question about that. The others, the guards especially, would keep a close eye on him now. But Ben still worried about it. It was his baby, this situation, and he worried about it.

He found the first-aid kit in the racks and tucked away the little souvenir he'd taken from Eddington. He turned and came back into the waist again. Eddington was back in his place. He was rubbing his jaw and looking rueful.

Ben got halfway down the aisle—

The space ship lurched suddenly and he was slammed to the left. When it lurched like that, too quickly for its artificial gravity to follow, something was wrong—very wrong. His shoulder and arm hit the bulkhead. The protruding knob of something stabbed him viciously. Hot pain went the length of his arm. And through it all he heard the sound of an explosion, of tearing metal. . . .

Ben acted from his spine, not his brain. He didn't stop to wonder exactly what had happened—in a broad way

that was clear. This was an attack of some kind. The ship had been struck. He heard the air whoosh through the hole in the hull, disappear forever into space, and he began to feel the terrible cold.

He caught the screeching sound of the oxy-renewer forward, near the control deck. That would send enough atmosphere through the compartment to keep a man conscious a few seconds. The emergency heaters were already glowing, cutting into the dark cold of space. But they wouldn't last forever either.

Ben turned and staggered again toward the forward part of the ship. The tremendous air pressure of the atmosphere from the oxy-renewer tried to shove him back. He squinted to protect his eyes from it and kept his stare on the plate-mesh switch, which was on the emergency panel just beside the control deck door.

Once he reached that switch they'd be safe—for a while, anyway. The hull of the ship was built in three layers and the middle layer consisted of a series of magnetic plates which moved automatically, when the switch was thrown to any aperture in the hull.

"Got to make it, got to make it!" he kept telling himself desperately, hypnotically. Sudden weariness bogged his feet, weakened his knees. It was getting colder. Things swam in his vision.

The ship was rocking and swerving in space. He could tell that by the way the artificial gravity lagged each change of direction—giving him a weird, floating, dreamlike sensation. Once lurching in a complete circle, he was able to glimpse the other passengers.

Two of the bridge players near the rear were missing—they'd been blown through the hole probably. Now, frozen to the hardness of metal, they'd just keep traveling in space in their original direction. Forever, probably. Most of the others had been thrown about considerably. One of the big space guards was flat on his face, wedged between two piles of baggage.

The Telenews man had a twisted

blood-soaked leg and sat there, staring at it stupidly. The Jovian prisoner, Xyl, was experiencing the only terror he knew—the fear of death. He was trying to flatten himself against the bulkhead.

Ben swung around again, nearly lost balance, recovered, then gave himself one tremendous push forward. He reached the panel. His hand closed on the mesh switch—he lost consciousness just as he closed it.

HE couldn't have been out long. He was on his knees and his face was slumped against the bulkhead between the waist and control deck when he opened his eyes. He got up unsteadily. The air was tighter. The wailing of the oxy-renewer had stopped.

He turned. He put his shoulder blades and palms to the bulkhead. He stood there, panting, and his eyes took everything in. The passengers were milling about. Some were just recovering from anoxia. A few were muttering. Several were moaning. They were very confused.

"All right, back to your seats everybody," Ben said.

They stared at him vaguely.

"I said back to your seats!"

He was a little startled at the firmness of his own voice. He was even more startled at how quickly they moved to obey.

They went back to their seats and then they sat there, staring at him. He pointed to the guard on the floor and to the Telenews man. "See what you can do. I'll be back in a second with plasma."

He stepped into Control. He stepped once more, forward—and then he stopped short. His eyebrows rose and without willing it he stepped back again.

Control was a shambles. Something—probably a nuclear shell—had come through the hull and exploded. Both Captain Mace and Lieutenant Washam were slumped over the panel. Mace's red head was twisted at an angle no living head could possibly assume. The grin was still on it.

Mace's hand rested on the panel, where it had fallen, on the mesh-switch.

That explained why there was air and warmth in the Control room. Beside Mace Lieutenant Washam was slumped back in his seat and his cropped blond head was split down the middle as though by an axe.

Ben felt sickness at his palate. He swallowed, and tried not to think about it.

He grabbed plasma from the racks and stumbled back into the passenger compartment. It seemed to him that he was now in more of a daze than he had been just before losing consciousness.

In the waist he took a deep breath and got to work. Some of the others were trying to move the guard who lay face down on the deck. He stopped that. He pushed them away and examined the man quickly and thoroughly.

He set up a plasma bottle, hung it on someone's outstretched hand, inserted the needle. Then he moved quickly to the Telenews man. More plasma—and plenty of narcophine, too.

Funny, Ben thought, most of these combat boys knew first aid—knew it better than he did. Yet they'd been undecided—even a little stupid about the whole thing. Maybe it was the shock—maybe the suddenness of everything. Well, he couldn't worry about that, now. He had something to tell them. This was going to be the toughest little speech of all.

He went forward and stood by the door to Control, and said, "May I have your attention, please."

He flushed slightly as they all turned blank stares upon him. What a fool thing—what a stuffy thing to say! Anybody worth his salt, any real leader, would have used other words, another tone of voice. Ben didn't know just what words or what tone—but he knew that he had been wrong.

Well, he had their attention.

He cleared his throat. He looked around. He was too embroiled within his own thoughts, his own doubts, really to see anything. He moistened his lips. "There's been trouble in Control. Both of our pilots have been hit. They're dead."

Complete silence, still the blank stares.

Ben said, "Uh—" and then he couldn't think of anything else to say. Stoppage. He swallowed hard.

He said, "We seem to be all right for the time being. An attacking spaceship can't possibly turn back for another pass before a matter of hours." Sure, he was telling *them*. He'd never seen an attacking spaceship, not even the one that had just attacked. *They* had. They'd seen it all.

He kept talking with a kind of insane determination. "The problem is to land—somewhere, if we can't make the Earth spaceport. We've got to get in somehow."

Another long silence and then a scarred construction sergeant said in a croaking voice: "Okay. What do we do?"

The meaning of it didn't hit Ben right away. The fact that one of the combat men had asked *him* what to do. Come to think of it it had sounded almost like sarcasm. Maybe, maybe not—Ben wasn't sure.

He asked, "Anybody here know how to land a spaceship?"

They took their blank stares away from his this time and turned them upon each other. Several shook their heads. Two nuclear gunners faced each other and shrugged.

Ben's eyes swung across the lot of them—and then landed on Xyl, the Jovian.

They stopped.
"You."

Ben pointed at him

Xyl had resumed man-shape again. Either he had quieted down by himself or the remaining guard had threatened him with an acid gun. He sat far back in the seat. He turned his expressionless eyes on Ben and his mushy voice, cast incongruously in a breezy space pilot's idiom, sounded.

"What's up? Why give me the big finger and the boiled eye, kid?"

"You're a space pilot," Ben said. "You can get us on course. And you can land this thing."

Xyl threw back the blob of his head and laughed. When he brought his head down again, he had stopped laughing. His face was flaccid. "Do you think I'd get *you* stupid jerks out of a hole? When did I take out citizenship papers for planet number three? Don't be silly."

"Okay," said Ben. "Suit yourself. Our rations will last maybe a week. You Jovians need food like anybody else. But even if we had food we're off course and the chances are maybe a million to one we'll hit Earth or any other planet. We're in a fair way to be space derelicts. You know that, don't you?"

Xyl thought it over. He gave no sign of thinking, such as cocking his head or frowning or squinting. But he was silent, clearly thinking it over. He looked up finally. He rose. The guard rose with him.

He said to Ben, "Come on kid, let's take a look at the driver's office."

There was the messy business first of moving the bodies of Mace and Washam. Ben called others in to help. He noticed that they sprang pretty quickly when he called them—even the bird Colonel with the clipped white mustache. He noticed that when they had finished doing something they looked to him for further instructions.

Xyl worked at the navigation table until he found the course. He said curtly, "Okay," out of the side of his mouth, then poured himself into the seat and began to manipulate the instruments. Ben and the guard stood behind him. Once he turned and grinned and then he laughed in a crazy way—more to himself than to the others.

The guard was a beefy man with bluish jowls and shortcropped black hair. His voice was a strident bass. He turned to Ben and said, "I don't like it. I don't like it one damn bit."

"Me, either," Ben said. He scratched his cheek. He shifted his stance. Seemed to him the backs of his knees prickled. He watched and waited.

Hard to tell what was happening. The big burning eye of the sun was still to the left, so they seemed to be on course.

Xyl, controlling, merely sat most of the time and watched dials and indicators. Once in awhile he pushed a button, moved a scale. He could be taking them out into eternal nothing for all Ben knew. He dropped that suspicion only when he saw the bright oval of Earth begin to grow in the front plates.

Ben said to the guard, "He's on course."

The guard said, "Yeah."

And Ben knew by the tone of the guard's voice that they were both thinking the same thing. Xyl might be going to Earth, all right, but he might just deliberately forget to decelerate. He might hang the nose on a course to Earth's big fat bosom—and just keep going. That might appeal to his sense of humor.

Ben said, "There's nothing we can do about it. We've got to take the chance he'll bring us in. We've got to stand here and wait."

The guard said, "Yeah."

Both shifted their feet again.

They neared Earth. They could see the continents and the oceans and the night shadow line moving against the planet's rotation. It was in the Atlantic. The telesight showed, enlarged, their own target—the state of New Mexico in the North American continent where the spaceport lay.

"So far so good," said Ben.

The guard merely nodded this time.

Once Xyl turned his face to Ben. That insane grin was still on it. He looked steadily and impudently at Ben for a moment, then said, "How come you saved my life from that combat-looney character, boy?"

If Ben had been able to find the words to explain it he probably wouldn't have liked the sound of them anyway. For an answer he shrugged.

Xyl said, "I see," and turned back to the controls.

The image of Earth filled the front plates before Xyl readied for his orbit turn. Again he looked at the other two. His wise-cracking manner was gone now. His dead pan was still there.

"In the cradles," he said. He reached for the lever that would tilt his own con-

trol seat into a vertical, spring-supported affair. He pressed the warning bell for the passengers.

Ben and the guard took two of the cradles in the crew quarters. They could watch Xyl from there. They could see him manipulate the controls like an organist at a six part fugue. They could hear him swear—they could see the times when he was puzzled and unsure.

Ben called across the aisle to the guard, "He doesn't know this type of ship. He's running on a prayer."

"Yeah," the guard said. He watched Xyl flatly.

THE ship's gravity lagged the change of direction and the cradles swung gently as it curved to the left to enter a standard orbit. They heard the faint hiss of the decelerators, still on low. Then there was a swing over to the right and the ship was on a wide involute spiral around the earth.

From his cradle Ben could see the third planet's surface move by. The ship, still at space-speed, curved around to center lightside. The sun glared in through the port windows.

Ben heard the creaking and felt the terrible heat first. He recognized it immediately. He brought his head up fast. "We've hit atmosphere!" he yelled at Xyl. "Your coolers! Get 'em on!"

Xyl pounced on the cooling switch. The hull plates kept creaking—the tech manual didn't recommend switching the coolers on with more than 250 C. on the outside plates. Ben looked up and eyed the patched shell hole anxiously.

Then the roar of the decel jets pounded in his ears. He was jolted. He felt himself swing in the cradle. He felt the straps bite into his limbs and body. He swore. A hardened space pilot could decel this fast with a cargo of freight—but not with passengers. Then he laughed a little crazily. Those passengers back there would be lucky if they landed alive and here he was worrying about their comfort.

The roar got louder. It filled everything everywhere. It became one over-

whelming mass of vibration. Ben began to get sick and dizzy. He tightened his lips. First time he'd had landing or blast-off sickness in ages. He swore again and forced himself to relax.

Blackness came suddenly and washed over him like a breaker.

The roar was still all about him when he awoke. He came to with most of his senses and the blurred objects in his sight came quickly into focus. He was still in the cradle. Xyl was still at the fore-plates, hunched over the control console. Earth loomed beyond him. Earth close and solid—Ben could see the shadow side of a mountain range, could even make out faintly the greener areas. The whole of it seemed to slam toward the ship.

Too fast—he's going too fast, Ben thought.

The guard across the way yelled. "*Hey—look out!*"

There was a crash.

Ben didn't go into blackness this time. He fell into a swirling kaleidoscopic unreality. It was like coming home late at night very drunk, lying on the bed, closing your eyes and feeling that the room went round and round.

Later he discovered that he was moving although he wasn't sure how or where and he didn't remember getting himself out of the cradle. The full use of his senses came back to him slowly. The first thing he noticed was that he was standing on ground—good firm ground—Earth ground.

That was a thrill you never quite lost, no matter how many planetfalls you made. He was outside then. He could smell Earth—he could smell growing things. He breathed deeply. His vision cleared and he saw the ship, plowed

deep and at an angle in a mountainside. He saw some of the other passengers wandering about, some in a daze very much like his own.

He had something in his hand. With mild surprise he looked at it. It was the thing he had taken away from Eddington during the fight.

And there was the sound of a step beyond his elbow and he turned and saw Eddington standing there. Eddington had his palm out. There wasn't any more wild look in his big eyes. He was grinning faintly.

"You can give that back to me now, buddy. After this it'll be just a souvenir."

Ben smiled back and handed him the thing. He said, "Where's Xyl?"

Eddington jerked his thumb at the ship. "He got in the blast of a decel jet when we hit. No more Xyl. But even if there was I wouldn't use this." He held up the object. "A spiky leaf from a Jovian cactus," he said. "The only thing besides acid that can kill one of those guys. Well—it'll look good in the living room some day. I'll look at it and remember you, buddy—and Xyl."

"Sure," said Ben. "Sure you will." But he wasn't really listening. He was looking around at the other passengers, who were beginning to form groups and come toward him. They were looking at him. They were waiting for him to tell them what to do—they depended on him to get them off the mountainside and back to some kind of civilization. They'd been depending on him all along.

Ben Harlow smiled and drew his shoulders back and got ready to give them a little briefing speech. He knew that this one—and any after it—would finally sound right in his own ears.

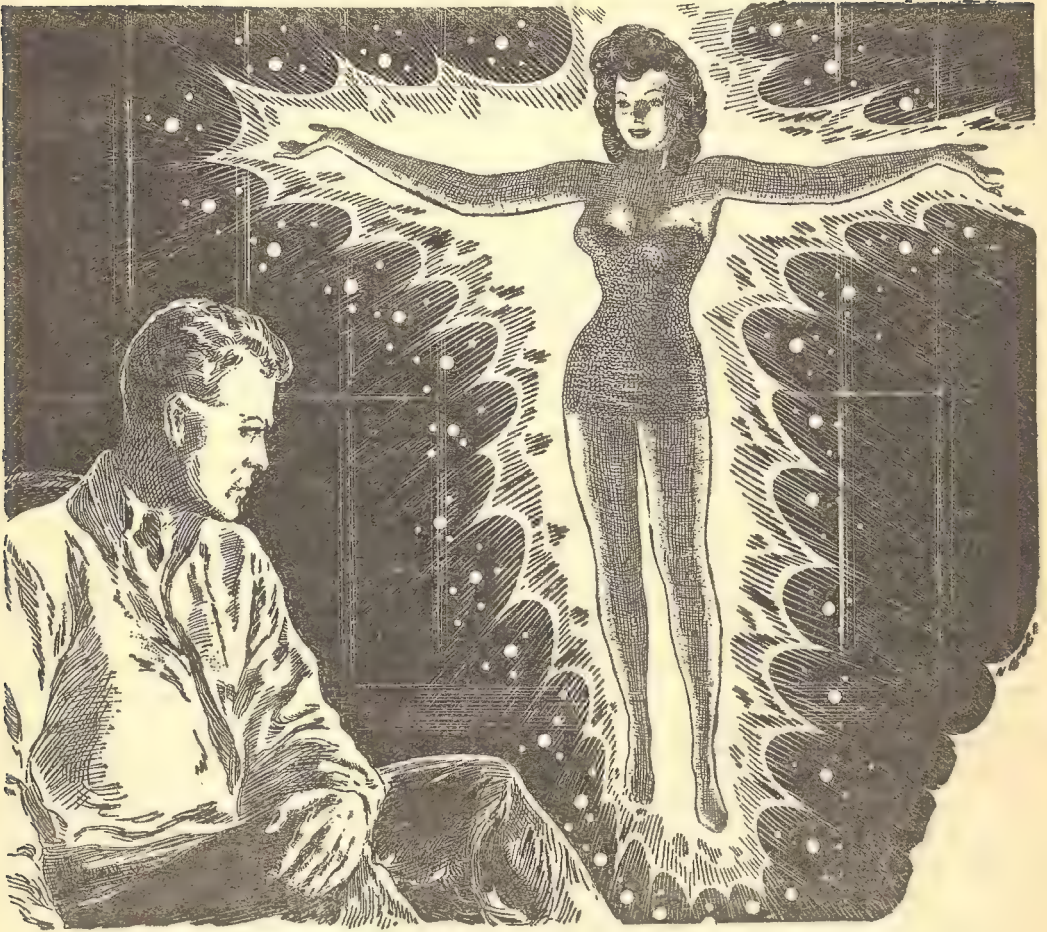
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MacShane knew of course that the women wasn't real



If You Don't Watch Out —

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG

THOMAS MACSHANE was a legendary figure long before he became a tortured man. I suppose you might call him a hermit. He seldom went into town and there was no friendliness in him when he talked to grownups. But

he knew that Freddy and I saw him through hero-worshipping eyes and he hated to disillusion us.

I was thirteen and Freddy was two years my junior. We used to hang around in front of the vacuum service

To find the threads of his own destiny, young Tim had to save the Martian explorer from the thrall of the beast!

store just waiting for McShane to notice us.

He'd stop and say, "Hello, kids! Any new specimens?"

I'd show him my butterflies then—and the beetles. Freddy collected minerals. I liked to collect living things but Freddy had a flair for minerology. He liked the bright quartz colors, the cobalt gleam and glitter of his big collection of stones.

"Fine, fine!" MacShane would say, his eyes lighting up. "Keep at it, kids! Every great naturalist started early and kept at it despite the sneers. Not many youngsters go in for butterfly collecting—"

He'd look at Freddy then and nod. "Or minerology! If you're fascinated by nature at twelve you'll finish where I did—fifty million miles from Earth with the unknown blowing cold upon you!

"You can't stop a kid who isn't a little savage to begin with. Start in your own mill pond, your own backyard, and you'll find that nature gets increasingly wonderful the farther out you go."

He always talked like that, with a mounting eagerness in his eyes, as though he were about to tell us exactly what he'd found on Mars that had changed the world for him.

Six feet three he was, gaunt and stoop-shouldered, with unruly black hair that must have hated combs. A long strand of his hair was always falling down over his face and getting in his eyes. His face was so deeply lined it was hard to believe he was only thirty-eight. He never smiled but sometimes he chuckled without smiling as if he couldn't help being amused by something he couldn't bear to talk about.

Big towns change but little towns never do. Not deep down where the roots are dark and tangled and gossip rages like a prairie fire.

The agony that came into MacShane's eyes when people tried to needle him about his fame-years was enough to kindle gossip. An explorer who's been to all the worlds can't shut himself up in one little corner of his native town

without sowing the whirlwind.

He'd been world-famous. Now he was hiding from the world in a dark old house that dated back to the early years of the twentieth century. He was a legend to grownups. But he was also a mirage, a negation, a man who never seemed quite real.

MacShane was entirely real only to Freddy and me. We didn't see him as a morose tortured man. To us he was a great golden man, gaunt and somber only when he went pedaling away on his gyro-bike. Close up and most of the time he blazed.

CHALK up another round in the struggle between youth and age. I think we'd have died for MacShane if he'd underscored the need for dying.

This day was no different from other days. He'd stopped to talk to us and now he was in the service store, ordering his weekly supplies. Neat little packages of boned chicken, wrapped in plastic, to be shuttled up to the old house on the hill. Sweetmeats and dehydrated vegetables and a bottle of cognac. Fresh strawberries, packed in preservofoil, to keep the flavor in and the moisture out. A lot of other edibles in a big square package that had come to him all the way from Chicago by shuttle-post.

We stared in through the window, noticing everything that went into the purchase tube. Then MacShane said, "Good day!" turned on his heel and walked out of the store, knowing the edibles were speeding underground toward the hill and that he wouldn't starve for another week.

He was just about to speak to us when a peal of thunder made him scowl, shake his head and stare up at the sky. A big storm was coming up and the air was charged with electricity.

"I didn't meant to park my bike so close to yours, Mr. MacShane!" Freddy said. "I'll get it out of the way!"

"Oh, that's all right!" MacShane said. He strode to Freddy's bike, lifted it as if he were hefting a fly and set it down again within three feet of Freddy. Then he climbed on his own bike and rode off,

waving a gaunt hand at us.

Five minutes later Ned Graham, who ran the store, came rushing up to us. "Boys, do me a favor!" he pleaded. "My delivery tube will go dead unless MacShane reverses the pressure when his order comes through. There's a big overload on account of the storm."

He scowled up at the sky. "Run up to his place and tell him, will you?"

Freddy started to put out his hand for the dime he half expected but I got in front of him. "Sure, Mr. Graham!" I said. "We'll bike right up and tell him!"

It was five minutes by jet-bike to the hill and for one full minute Freddy just glowered at the sky. We were side by side on our bikes, riding through a high haze that had come up in the lee of the storm. Ahead of us the road rose sharply and we could see MacShane's dark old house, anchored to the black earth like a mooring beetle on a rockbound moon.

"What are you sore about?" I demanded.

Freddy's reply was evasive. "Why doesn't he have a visiphone?"

"So people can't call him up and bother him," I said.

"How do you know we won't bother him by showing up without being asked?" Freddy demurred logically.

"Don't be a dope!" I said. "We're not just breaking in on him without an excuse. Besides he likes us. We'll never get a chance like this again. I bet he invites us in and shows us his specimens. All of 'em maybe!"

I turned and looked at Freddy. "You almost spoiled it when you tried to chisel a dime out of Mr. Graham!" I told him. "When he saw you stick out your hand he almost changed his mind!"

"Yeah!" Freddy agreed. "He'd rather go himself than shell out a dime—the old skinflint!"

"MacShane's the greatest explorer who ever lived!" I said with boyish grandiloquence. "He didn't just explore the explored places. He went off by himself. He explored the little moons of Mars with a lot of special equipment.

"There's no air on Phobos and hardly any gravity. He told me it was like walking around a big chunk of ice, revolving so fast you could practically meet yourself coming back!"

"There are only two Venusian and three Martian animals!" Freddy said. "McShane didn't capture any new ones."

"How do you know?" I demanded.

"You can't keep a thing like that secret," Freddy said. "Look how many people went to San Francisco last year just to look at the Martian exhibit!"

"What did you think of them?" I asked.

"Aw, people are the same everywhere!" Freddy grunted.

"Don't be a dope! I mean—what did you think of the animals?"

"The stink was awful!" Freddy said.

"If you poured glue on an anteater you'd get a Martian animal without the stink. Why don't somebody try it?"

THE storm was racing up the hill and getting there ahead of us. It was bleak up ahead with a big cloud-burst building in the middle of the sky. But we really didn't care how soon the rain came because we had skid-guards on our bikes and the countryside needed cooling off and we liked getting drenched.

It was Freddy who dismounted first. He drew in to the side of the road, leaned his bike against a tree and started up the hill on foot as though he'd made up his mind to remain angry because I'd blocked his attempt to chisel a dime out of Mr. Graham.

He reached the front porch ahead of me, then turned and waited for me to come up. I could see that his courage had failed him just when he needed it most.

"There's a light out in back!" he said. "What's the sense of ringing the doorbell if Mr. McShane's out in the kitchen? He'll be plenty burned up if he has to come to the front door just to let us in!"

I gave Freddy a scornful glance and brushed right past him. I had climbed

the porch and was reaching out for the bell when I heard the strange noise. It wasn't a very loud noise but it set my teeth on edge. It was a funny sort of tinkling like a lot of little icicles falling off a roof.

Tinkle, tinkle, *crash*—echoing right through the house.

I turned and stared at Freddy. "Come on!" I said.

There was only one glowing window at the back of the house and Freddy and I approached it cautiously, our steps as light as thistledown. It's funny how silent two frightened boys can be when there's spying to be done. Our shoes didn't make a sound on the long grass of the lawn as we crept up close to the window and crouched down.

There was a drowsy hum of insects just below the sill. A big blundering June bug went buzzing past my ear and from the ivy overhead a cricket chirped shrilly. But the tinkling had stopped. I nudged Freddy's arm.

"Stay down!" I whispered. "If we both look in he'll be twice as sure to see us!"

MacShane was sitting just inside the window. He was facing away from me, his heavy shoulders looming against a glare that spread out from him like a bonfire crackling and leaping high on a dark street at midnight.

I thought for a minute the glare was coming from MacShane—but it wasn't really. It was coming from a big iron-barred cage, which towered in shadows on the far side of the room. Swirling out from the cage and creeping around MacShane until he seemed to be on fire, too.

A horrible fear clutched the pit of my stomach. A huge hairy animal was pacing about just inside the bars, its heavy claws clattering on the bright metal floor of the cage.

It was no good my telling myself that a boy who took to natural history as a duck to water had no right to fear a caged animal. I couldn't tear my eyes from the slow ungainly movements of the beast. I kept remembering how I'd once fled in terror from a big South

American tree sloth, swinging itself from limb to limb in a cage at the zoo.

To my childish eyes the sloth had seemed to move in a way that was unnatural, revolting. *The sloth will get you if you don't watch out.* It will climb up a drainpipe into your room and claw out your eyes with merciless slowness.

The beast in the cage wasn't a sloth. It resembled more a great star-headed mole except that the star was luminous, the source of the light that flooded the room from floor to ceiling.

But the beast moved as a sloth, back and forth and around and around in the same hideously deliberate way, with the same spine-chilling slowness. And from the star on its head came a glow that made me think of dead burning leaves being raked over in October, the sky bright behind them and all horror lurking behind the brightness.

Then I saw that MacShane was sitting beside a low table, the light washing not only his face and hands but glimmering on the long barrel of a pencil-ray gun.

The weapon was lying on the table well within reach of MacShane's strong hairy hand. I remembered thinking a little wildly how like a harvest spider MacShane's hand seemed, the fingers bunching themselves in the glare.

Suddenly MacShane's voice rang out in the stillness. "How can I make you understand? Surely you must know that I would set you free if I could. But when you struck at me with your mind you made me your captive. If I freed you now my life would be over."

It wasn't the voice of a proud confident man, at home anywhere in space. It was the voice of a man tortured in body and mind, crying out from the depths of some great despair.

The beast stopped pacing and for an instant the light in the room grew so dazzling that the shrubbery outside the window reflected the radiance, driving away the blackness of the storm.

FREDDY was no longer crouching down. When I turned my head I could see his white face on a level with

my own, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

My mouth was dry and I had difficulty in swallowing. But I didn't think I could be as scared as Freddy looked. I took pride in that until another tinkling crash brought my head around with a jerk. I stared into the room again, struck numb by the strangeness of what I saw.

The walls had vanished and I was staring at a tumbled waste of red sand. I was staring straight out over a Martian landscape, bathed in a sultry glare. I recognized the landscape from pictures I had seen of the great weed-choked canals, filled with broken, rusting machines, built by a race that had perished when man was a snarling primate on a steamy jungle Earth.

There's only one Martian landscape. If you set your camera up anywhere near a canal all of the photographs are pretty much the same. Desolation is the keynote. The high walls of the canals look blue-black and thronged with shadows. The sand is always tumbled, wind-blown, stretching away for miles. The mountains are more dismal than the mountains of Earth. Snow-capped but without grandeur—craggy, remote, casting long ugly shadows on the waste.

There was light behind and above MacShane and suddenly as I stared the light exploded in a fiery burst and the beast was back in its cage again, the walls of the room looming solidly behind it.

"I'll *kill* you!" MacShane muttered hoarsely. "Then I'll be free of you forever!"

MacShane's hand closed over the pencil-ray gun as he spoke. The room had become as still as death but the instant MacShane raised the weapon the tinkling began again.

As the nerve-shattering sound echoed across the room a blazing crescent of light swept out from the glowing star on the beast's head. For an instant the light hovered in the air between MacShane and the beast. Then it filled the room, blotting out both beast and cage.

Straight out of the glow a woman

walked. She wore a strange garment, shining, golden-textured. Her lips were slightly parted and her bosom rose and fell as she held out her arms to MacShane.

To the boy who stared, just awakening to life's greatest wonder, the face of that woman was an enigma and a challenge. I saw it with a strange stirring, a pounding at throat and temples. But I could not see it through MacShane's eyes and I remember it only as the face of the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

For a moment MacShane sat staring, utter torment in his eyes. He knew of course that the woman wasn't real. He knew she was a lure set floating in the room to ensnare him and draw him within reach of the beast's claws.

But I didn't know. Even when MacShane leapt to his feet with a terrible despairing cry and went stumbling toward her I thought he was about to embrace a flesh-and-blood woman. He told me later that his arms swept the empty air, embraced a chill emptiness. But for the barest instant a living woman did seem to hang limp in MacShane's arms like a beautiful white moth, her limbs fluttering.

Then the light blazed and soared all about MacShane and the walls of the room came wavering back.

MacShane was struggling in the grip of the beast. It towered above him, the glowing star on its head as red as blood. It had ripped off his shirt, and was clawing his back as it held him pressed tight to the bars.

I had never fired a pencil-ray gun in my life. But I climbed into the room and I picked the gun up and I used it to save MacShane. It all happened so fast that I can't remember just how the beast died—whether it fell convulsively back into the cage as I fired, or simply slumped down, releasing its grip on MacShane.

But I do remember one thing clearly. When the ray pierced the beast's head it gave a great cry and the glowing star went out. Then it lay still.

I had a brief glimpse of Freddy's

white face just outside the window with the blackness of the storm all about him. I remember how superior I felt until Freddy's face went whipping away into emptiness and I crashed to the floor in a dead faint.

* * * * *

I promised MacShane I'd be at the station when he returned to Lakeview with his bride of a week and I kept that promise to the dot.

I was standing behind a baggage truck when they both stepped down from the train. She saw me peeking out from behind the truck and came running toward me through the rain.

"Tim!" she cried. "Oh, I'd know you anywhere! Look for freckles, Tom said, a lot of them, and the kind of shyness that hides courage and—"

She wasn't like the woman MacShane had risked his life to embrace in the old dark house. She had a crinkly nose and a few freckles too. She had friendly blue eyes. She wasn't glamorous at all.

She bent down and kissed me and I think she was crying because I could feel a wetness on my face.

"That beast had to die first, Tim!" she said. "There was no other way Tom could have freed himself. He's terribly human, Tom is, and I've never stopped loving him!"

MACSHANE came up then and laid a grateful hand on my shoulder. "I don't deserve her, Tim!" he said. "A man who can't be loyal to just one real woman doesn't deserve Molly!"

Molly laughed. "Tom uses a lot of big words, Tim, but if you ask me that beast was just plain downright malicious. Tom thinks it flashed three-dimensional memory pictures from the star on its head as an adaptive mechanism during its mating season on Mars. The female liked to see what the courting male had on its mind or something like that.

"The mechanism worked so well it could use it on human beings too. It could get inside a man's mind and build up a picture in its own mind of a man's biogenetic mate. Then it could televise

that image—"

"Let me explain it, darling," MacShane said. "By biogenetic mate, Tim, I mean the kind of woman my ancestors had dreamed about for generations. You see, beauty is relative and each man carries a different subconscious picture of the one perfect woman about with him.

"The beast knew how to get at that picture and reproduce it in colors as a walking three-dimensional image. It showed me that woman in a blaze of glory, week after week, to torture me and force me to set it free again on Mars."

"But you didn't!" I said.

"No, Tim! By trying to free itself it enslaved me. I couldn't give her up, Tim! You saw how real she seemed!"

MacShane's hand tightened on my shoulder. "Stay away from Mars, Tim! When you grow up, I mean. More of those beasts will be captured and brought to Earth. Don't you be the one to do the capturing. Leave that to naturalists who aren't the dreamy romantic sort."

He looked at me and nodded. "You're the kind of lad who'd never marry a real woman if you once saw how—well, how perfect a woman can be!"

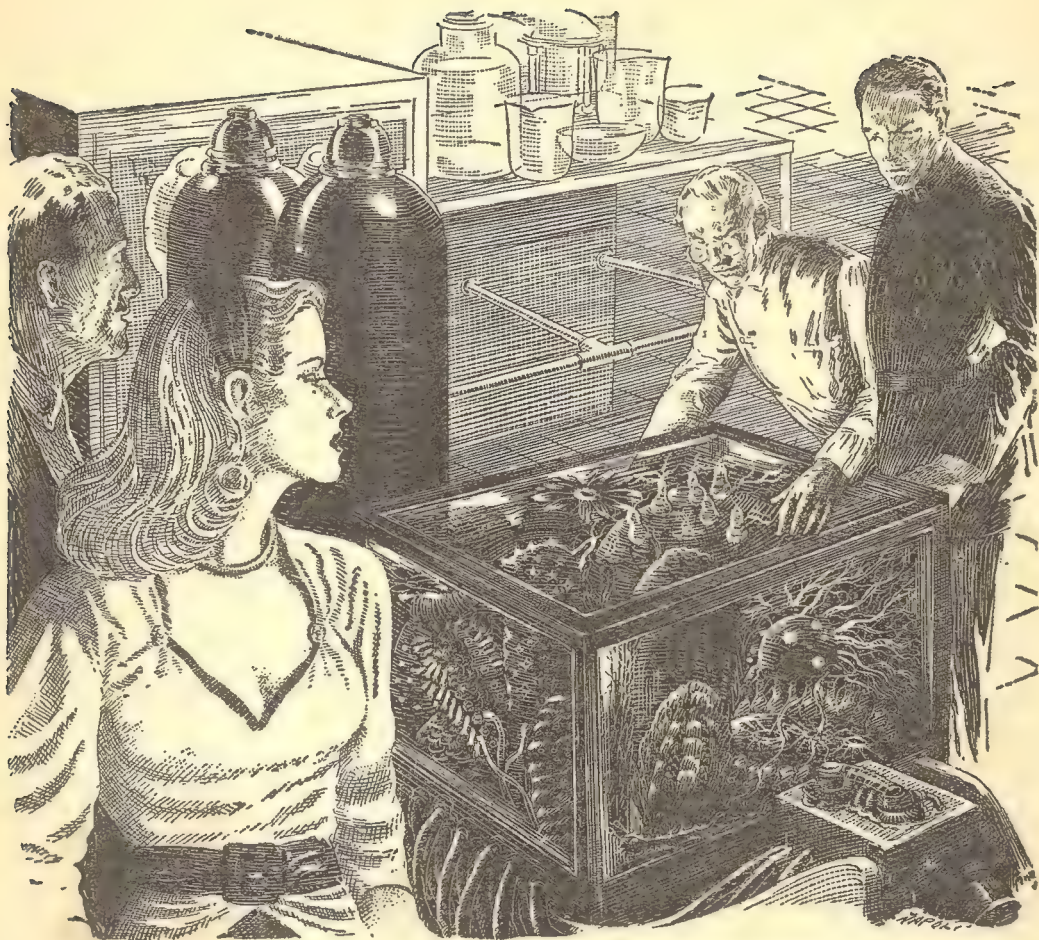
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It's strange how the memory of that far-off day comes drifting back. The shadows are lengthening on the red Martian waste and I can hear—the tinkling. I'm armed, and ready.

She won't be real—how could she be? But I'll see her face to face and she'll be real to me. As real as Orion or the Pleiades or moonlight on a forest pool or flaming orchards in the dawn.

I'll be in no real danger as long as I remember that the Martian race has been dead for three million years. I have more will power than MacShane. No beast can really enslave me.

That silly little line that keeps running through my head. It's nonsense, of course. Utter nonsense—gibberish. I'd be crazy to take it seriously. *The Martians will get you if you don't watch out!* Why, the Martian race—



The sealed glass case was a tangle of swift-moving vegetation

BLUFF PLAY

By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

When an enemy nation reaches the planets ahead of the United States, does it mean the curtain will ring down on freedom?

WE'D seen some photographs. Now we saw the reality. Out there to the north—north of Alaska and across the pole in Asia—was where the little darts of incandescence came from. They

streaked upward like inverted meteors, going out into space instead of falling from it. Two of them now . . .

Young Copeland was at the theodolite. After the specks of fire had vanished

into the sunset glow of midnight in mid-summer we waited tensely for his answer—though we knew just about what it would be. . . .

"I make out their rate of climb at approximately nine miles per second," he drawled. "Two miles per second above the velocity of escape from the Earth. Considering that their takeoff point is probably about two thousand miles away. . . ."

I guess it was pretty corny for me, Joe Palmetier, to say, "Space-ship," then.

But it was almost as corny for Ted Brand, our leader, to retort in his hard tones, "What did you expect? This is nineteen hundred fifty-five, man!"

"Only nineteen hundred fifty-five," somebody else put in.

There were no doubters among us. Certainly not on the basis of reasoning. Nobody knew better than we that our own Air Force labs had done the job too. And we knew just how far advanced the actual secret construction work was back there in the underground assembling rooms in Colorado. Twenty big space-ships with nuclear power—better than these—theirs—must be.

But emotion is less flexible and more primitive than reason—sometimes it doesn't quite keep up with the swift advancement of science. "Space-ship" was a word that had been in the language, long before there was a reality for it to name. It had been with us all as a dream, as a glamorous unattainable, since we could read.

It was natural for a few such interplanetary bugs as ourselves to inherit the job of making the dream true, wasn't it? Because each man should go into the line of work that interests him most. But now the truth was a little awesome and tough to grasp and accept, deep down, even for us.

This was a trivial point, mentionable only as the dawn of a new time. Like a certain dawn, just ten years ago, over a Japanese city called Hiroshima. And that was where the pleasurable awe of it was converted instantly into a dark and poisonous murk.

We'd been sent flying north to Alaska to get the facts about the rumors—about the nearly proven certainty. Well, now we had those facts beyond dispute.

I stuck out my neck again, putting the main and obvious idea into words. "For once," I said, "*they're* a little ahead of us in technical achievement. Maybe a month ahead. We're building our first space fleet. *They've* already got *theirs* in action.

"Ever since World War Two they've been hoping to be a little ahead of us so that they could knock us silly, swiftly, and without fear of serious reprisal. Well, now's their short-term chance."

I think Ted Brand hated me some just then for saying it. He glared at me briefly, almost with contempt. Then, saying nothing, he looked toward the northern sky. Everybody else except young Copeland did the same. Young Copeland was a strange cool likable sort. He just went on making calculations on a little pad, computing what he already knew in round numbers. None of us spoke.

THE northern sky of the midsummer sub-arctic was a beautiful soft green, above the orange streak of the sun gliding just beneath the rocky horizon. Nothing could have seemed more peaceful—not even a painting. But it was the pendent peace of waiting for the axe to fall.

A feeling of helplessness brought a furious lump to my throat. Memories of history that I had known, came to my mind. Most of our leaders had really tried. Some people had made mistakes. Maybe we should have struck with all our might, long ago. Who knew?

Relations hadn't yet been broken off. Maybe it was sad farce comedy, like a lot of comedy that had gone before. . . . But what did that mean to our cities, bombed from space by ships that, in a month's time, we could never strike back at? We'd never get caught up soon enough.

And now the barrier of fear of us, that had kept us safe, was down. We were gone geese. We were like a few

cancer patients that find out about themselves. Let the hundred and eighty million others keep as much of their blessed ignorance as possible, even when the population dispersal—of limited value—was ordered for city and town.

So we all just stood there, looking at the northern sky where the darts of fire had vanished. And we were waiting too for Fred Nichols' return in his tiny scout plane. He had gone across the Pole for a closer look. He was due back now—if he was ever coming.

Now we saw the spark of flame from his jets. There was really no reason why this should make me hope but it did. And I could see the grim hope too in Ted Brand's face. I guess the prospect of more news in adversity is always like that. Things couldn't be much worse—so they might get better.

Nichols landed crazily in our little glade. He was smeared with dirt and a bullet had gone through his left arm.

"Well, what gives?" Brand snapped at him as he lay on the stretcher.

"Not much," Nichols answered. "I landed near their base. I sneaked close. But they shot up my camera and I had to beat it. All I brought back was this."

We all stared at the thing. Just a lump of bluish mud, wrapped in a bit of cellophane that Nichols must have torn from a pack of cigarettes. It was smaller than a man's hand. One side of it showed the tread-impression of a vast tire.

"Picked it up on their runway," Nichols said. "Their space-ships land like planes—on rubber. I saw. You can see for yourselves that this mud must have been stuck to a wheel—after a landing somewhere else. I'll bet—on another planet."

I guess that what Nichols said made all of us see pictures—even though bluish mud isn't too uncommon on Earth. It was probable. It made my spine tingle for a moment.

But Ted Brand's expression quickly showed his disgusted bitter disappointment. He was a practical hardheaded sort, trying to face a terrible situation with a practical hope. All he got was—this.

The reaction of Nils Narvaard, our chemist, was quite different. Nils Narvaard was old and bookish and dreamy—absolutely different from Ted Brand, our chief. There was something exasperatingly vague about him.

He was one of those deeply academic guys, who, right in the middle of desperation, can ramble right off into a poem or the color of a flower—as if such matters were the important ones. Not life and death or justice to a brutal enemy. It was as if, like a child, he didn't understand facts.

Now Nils' eyes fairly bugged out with unbelieving pleasure and awe. "All I have to do is reach out my hand," he said wonderingly, "to touch a piece of another world."

We might have tittered a little if circumstances hadn't been so tough. We might have kidded Nils. But the way he could drift off on a pink cloud was too pathetic somehow.

Brand breathed one word, "Nuts!" It plumbed the depths of tired fury. He tossed the lump of mud to Nils, whose hands closed around it more lovingly than the hands of a miser clutching the crown jewels of some vanished empire.

I could guess that Ted Brand was thinking of Rhoda Huzarski, one of our lab assistants back in Colorado. Blond, pleasant, pretty, cool—she was an Iowan of Polish extraction, the book said. Right now Brand would be trying to think of ways to keep Rhoda safe.

FOR a moment I watched young Copeland patching up Nichols' wounded arm. Copeland was expert and gentle—a real nice chap. I was thinking then that he was of English and Swedish origin and that he came from Minnesota. Funny how those questions of origin seemed so important now.

We all got into our big plane—one of the very newest. In two hours of fission-driven flight we were back in Colorado.

Life didn't change much there. The construction in the assembling rooms wasn't stopped as a futile thing. It was hurried along at top speed—even if it was futile. It had to be like that. What

would you expect—quitting?

We weren't back an hour before young Copeland was quietly picked up by the F.B.I. I didn't even hear about it for several days. How they'd nailed him for snooping didn't matter. You just kept wondering if he had accomplices still at large.

Yeah, life went on. Same regular duties—testing metals was my part. Same pistol drill, same drilling in rough and tumble commando stuff—which even us civilian personnel got in minor doses. If it was going to be good for anything now. Same food in the underground mess hall. Same eternal hum of low-flying planes patrolling the barbed-wire barriers. But the waiting was different. Just when would the axe fall?

Ted Brand found himself a new argument for hope—or a new defense-mechanism. "How do we know that our government hasn't already got a space-fleet?" he kept telling everybody. "Everything in this world is bluff and secrecy—and hang the cost. Our project could be just a blind. If anybody's got a space-fleet our country must have!"

Umhmm-m—but that kind of optimism did sound a bit wild—even when Rhoda Huzarski informed me fervently, "Ted's a believer. It's good to be a believer. They're never licked, Joe."

Me—I found something, too. I'd been slightly friendly with old Nils Narvaard—so now I was in his quarters for several evenings, watching him do things to that lump of blue mud.

"First I heat a piece slowly, Joe—in a sealed flask," he said. "The heat drives out the moisture and the gases—which it contains like a sponge holding liquid. I do not heat it very hot—it would spoil the experiment. And half of the mud I save—with no heating at all except by room temperature.

"Umm-m—now let us see what we have. From one piece of soil, Joe, I can learn more about another planet than other people can with all the telescopes ever made."

Slowly he went through the test of the gaseous contents of the flask. "Plenty of water-vapor," he said at last.

Then, a little later, "Some sulphur-dioxide as if from volcanoes. Quite a lot of carbon-dioxide—more than on Earth. Hmmm—less oxygen than on Earth. Nitrogen? About the same amount. Let's figure it out, Joe.

"What planet would that be? Not the big outer ones, certainly, with their atmospheres of ammonia and methane. Not Mercury or Mars—they're both too dry for one thing. Venus is all that is left. But didn't someone say that the atmosphere of Venus is waterless and oxygenless and full of wind-blown dust? That is a theory of recent years, which some claim to have proven.

"But does it make sense, Joe? Relative proportions of the various chemical elements are more or less the same throughout the universe. Is it reasonable to believe that a planet, almost the twin of Earth in size and mass, should be without water when the hydrogen and oxygen that compose water are so plentiful even in the farthest stars?

"Could it be that the spectroscopic tests of our theorists have gone not deep enough into the dense cloud-blanket of Venus for an honest answer?"

Nils Narvaard rattled on—and for minutes at a time he almost carried me with him, out of grim reality into the still-nameless distance, where other life might live.

This effect was even stronger on the following evening when I took Ted Brand with me to Nils' quarters and we watched him crush a bit of dried blue mud to powder and spread it out thin on a sheet of glass, then examine it carefully with a powerful lens.

Meanwhile Nils lectured absently. "I do not think that the mud froze very hard in crossing space in spite of the cold," he said. "The sun's rays are very strong there and would warm it some. I have analyzed a sample of this soil. So much of silicates, so much of iron compounds—and so forth. And, yes—there are organic substances present.

"Now—what else is there? See! Little threads. Shall we consider them root-fibres of some kind? And is this leathery fragment part of a leaf? Or are there

leaves on other worlds? And is this bead-like thing perhaps a little tiny seashell? Furthermore, what are these shiny black specs? Fellas—do you know what I'm going to try, next?"

Ted Brand and I had bent close to Nils as he fussed over that glass plate. The effect of this weird kind of detective work was a crawling sensation—half thrill with a little of fear thrown in—puckering my hide.

Ted Brand, for his part, still looked disgusted with Nils for his academic puttering at a time like this. But into his face had crept a kind of harassed intensity. Maybe it was hope again—the kind of hope that clutches at straws. You know how it goes. Maybe here—somewhere, somehow—there was an answer to something.

I FELT it, too. And I thought, arguing silently with myself: *People are deep. Never trust what you see. Look at young Copeland. Swell guy—at least on the surface. Probably an idealist. But idealists make the best fanatics and martyrs. There's a blind spot in their brains. Wrong or right they can take a belief and stick to it.*

Other men can be the leaders, the stinkers, the megalomaniacs. But the idealists are best at the tougher, more thankless jobs. They make the best spies for instance—because nobody can pervert or divert them.

They have the conscientiousness to memorize a past that isn't their own and live it until they almost believe it themselves. They can worm their way patiently—waiting their chance for years if necessary. Young Copeland was like that. And I'll bet anything he wasn't born in Minnesota.

To me all this was just a buildup for judging Nils Narvaard—who frankly claimed to be a Finn. But this didn't count with me now. Rather I kept thinking, with a wild sort of hope, of that old story-book plot wherein the apparent muddlehead turns out to be the smart one and saves the day.

It was desperate wishful thinking—nothing more. I realized it by degrees

when Nils pointed to a glass cabinet in the corner and said, "I'm going to seal up that cabinet, attach an air-conditioning unit, give the inside of it a climate.

"High humidity, warmth and an atmosphere with a composition that matches what I found out. And a soil like the mud. I'm going to grind up all the mud and mix it with the soil. Then I'll wait to see if anything happens."

Sure—as if he had all the time in the world! As if we weren't waiting for catastrophe that would be like pieces of the sun dropped, exploding, on the Earth, killing our citizens by the millions. Nils Narvaard's face was as guileless as a baby's. Nils was a pure student of "higher" knowledge. He belonged in another gentler era.

Once and forever the hope vanished within me—that he could be, maybe, the shrewd and devious savor-of-the-day underneath. Knowing this was like the loss of a last chance. It was a hard lump for me to swallow.

Ted Brand didn't even get sore. He sighed, sounding weary. He even grinned a little. Maybe that meant, in him, the dignity of man accepting his fate. "Sure, Nils," he said, more gently than was his way. "You're doing fine work. Keep it up."

But out in the corridor, talking to me, he sounded different. "People might get mad at Nils for wasting time, Joe—if we tell them what he's doing. But what's the difference? We might as well keep still, Joe."

After that for quite awhile I didn't see much of Brand. I was kept busy testing metals. I guess Brand was pretty busy too. I know now that he sent a lot of wild-sounding wires and phone calls, struggling to get permission to communicate outside of our secret area.

A couple of times I glimpsed him in the halls of our underground lab with you-know-who—Rhoda Huzarski. Remembering young Copeland I wondered if it ever occurred to Brand that she was supposed to be a Polish American, born in Iowa, that her blond prettiness and her high cheekbones might still make all this a lie.

She could be another kind of Slav, not American at all. Yeah—strange how important nationalities appeared now—when the ideal said that all peoples should be alike. As for Brand, what was there to say about him, except that maybe he was an idealist and a fanatic and a believer with a blind spot in his brain too? But that's common. Men in love are like that—blind.

For two weeks I didn't get back into Nils Narvaard's quarters. I was busy. I was a little disgusted with him. And things happened. Not the final thing—but things. International diplomatic wrangling went on.

High over our big cities space-ships appeared out of reach of our loftiest defenses. They did not attack. It was just sabre-rattling, the cat playing with the mouse, the old war of nerves, the grim promise. A matter of hours, maybe—

Within our area there were rumors that another snooper was going to be grabbed soon—that identity had long been known.

And the President of the United States spoke over the newscast. "The disaster that it seems must come can no longer be given the outmoded name of war," he said quietly. "It has gone beyond that. We have been too wise ever to want it.

"But let our would-be attackers know that we have not needed to brag or to flaunt our weapons. We have them. So let the leaders of this other nation think carefully before they are rash. We have our space-fleet too. And for any harm we receive we can give fivefold in return."

It was obvious brave bluff, a last-ditch trick, something that could be true in another fortnight—that might as well have been a thousand years hence. Oh, sure, the fleet was almost ready—even the crews had long been in training, working carefully inside wooden mockups of ships—with real instruments, engines and weapons. But what good could it ever do?

Even out in the sunlight, where the sky was blue and unflawed by the presence of any enemy ships from rim to

rim, you could feel your muscles and your skin tighten as if to receive a blow. Any time, now—any moment.

BUT other incidents were still to happen. One early morning, in the same corridor where Nils Narvaard's and my quarters were, a young guard approached me and whispered, "You're fast enough, Mr. Palmetier. Do me a favor? A man in a uniform like mine may pass here at any moment. He has been a guard here for a long time too, in fact.

"He'll probably be hurrying a little, and maybe carrying a camera—a guy about thirty with a flattish nose. You won't know him by name but that doesn't matter. He mustn't see me. I'll be waiting to cover you and to jump him, there in the broom-closet, as soon as you slow him up. Okay?"

I only nodded—and then hung around, absently looking at the bulletin board. In less than a minute the bird showed up and I nailed him—fair. The young guard helped. It was a swift clean job. But there was a bitter payoff.

While were still all sprawled on the floor a girl appeared—Rhoda Huzarski. She was deliberate but quick in what she did. A hammer swung in her hand. I heard the dull clunk of it as it bit into the young guard's skull.

But it really didn't stop moving. I saw it swinging toward me—hard. But what could I do? Rhoda Huzarski's Slavic face was grim and cool. I blacked out without feeling any pain.

What I awoke to was the blabbing of nurses in the infirmary. Little Miss Huzarski, of course, was in the jug. So was Ted Brand—on suspicion—because he had been so friendly to her. The other guy—the fake guard who was a snooper—got away. He'd had all his papers—needed for departure—ready beforehand. He hadn't tried to smuggle the contraband camera out—just the films. Enough . . .

Yeah—I could guess what was going on, now. Somehow, maybe by secret plane-pickup, he was hurrying back to his homeland to deliver the final word

to his bosses—the word that was the result of months of prying by young Copeland, the Huzarski creature and himself. That our nation was almost hopelessly weak. I realized that all the records of the development and progress of armaments must be here at our lab and workshop. *They* would know now, for sure, that it was safe to strike. . . .

Yes—let the cold sweat run down your back and into your shoes. It was really all over now except the fact itself. The final curtain, with the bums and their concentration camps on top, winning out. I felt sick of myself and of everybody. Everybody felt sick of everybody else.

The days crawled by. There wasn't any saving medicine for the nerves except backbreaking useless work to finish building a fleet that would never fly. Why should I try to see Ted Brand or that fool, Nils Narvaard? Why trust foolish blundering people with even a gesture of friendship?

Sure—those days crawled by—maybe in more ways than one. I began to wish that *they*, on the other side of the North Pole, would strike and get it over with.

Then I began to see why they were slow about it. Time was on their side now. This nerve-cracking suspense was part of psychological warfare, meant to soften our souls to jelly.

Two weeks passed like that. The crews were coming in to man the now all-but-finished space-ships. But did it matter? Over there, beyond the Pole, they had probably arranged to clock our progress perfectly.

And what could be more perfect a victory for them or more disheartening for us than to knock our new fleet out, ship by ship, as the great doors in the roofs of the underground assembling rooms opened and the craft emerged one by one from below?

I didn't have much purpose any more. I just blundered around like in a dream. I guess that that was how I blundered to Nils Narvaard's door and knocked. There was no real reason for it except maybe a vague wish for companionship.

I was admitted. There were six guards inside—and Nils. And Ted Brand and the Huzarski woman. I suppose it was appropriate for those two to be there at that time—now that I think about it. Everybody looked grim except that Brand gave me an apologetic smile that looked self-conscious, not like him at all. "Hi, Joe," he said. I figured he ought to be ashamed to speak to me. But who am I to be hard-hearted.

"Hi," I answered.

MY attention centered a moment later on the sealed glass case in the corner—air-conditioned inside to match the climate of Venus. Its interior was a tangle of swift-growing vegetation. Pallid—snaky—some of it with delicate fronds.

Here was plant-life more weird than the stuff that had graced the Earth during the Carboniferous Period, two hundred and fifty million years ago. But it was from another world—from Venus.

Was it hard to guess how this had happened when on Earth too all normal soil contains living bacteria, spores, seeds? Even the big insect-like creature that crept feebly on a leaf must have hatched from a tiny egg in that lump of blue mud.

It was the rather dramatic end of a fine useless academic experiment. Yes, I was grudgingly impressed even now. But could anybody blame me for turning my awe around and making it sarcastic?

I spoke directly to Brand. "Coming into this room, Brand," I said, "and seeing what's in this case, a stranger would almost think that it was *our* ships that had ranged to Venus, not *theirs*. You'd almost think that *our* fleet had brought this plantlife back from across space. Not that it hasn't even flown yet and will be snuffed out at any moment now."

Brand smiled again, faintly. "Sure, Joe," he said, sounding almost boyish for once. "That was the impression their snooper got too—the one we allowed, convincingly, to make his escape with a photograph of what's in that case. I guess his bosses got the same idea.

(Concluded on page 154)

a novelet by

MARGARET ST. CLAIR



The

CHAPTER I

Sanedrin Love

THE decision is difficult, I know," the surgeon said. Since he was a Venusian his face was quite impassive but there was sympathy in his voice. "Unfortunately there is no one else whom we can ask. And we cannot wait much longer. You are her husband. You will have to decide."

Richard Dekker held his clasped hands before his eyes and stared at them. They were trembling. Part of his mind wondered irrevelantly why they wouldn't stop trembling when he was ordering them to. His lips were dry—he had to lick them twice before he could speak.

Richard Dekker, Brushed by Godliness, Finds the

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Ivor was stooping over the basin where the Key floated.

The Everlasting Food

"I thought—physicians were supposed to save life," he said.

"Yes, yes—but this is not a simple case, Pamir Dekker. You see, your wife is one of the Sanedrin."

Dekker made a noise in his throat. "She is one of the Sanedrin," the surgeon repeated. "That means—well,

you have been married to her for three years. You know a little of what it means. If we operate she will lose the Seeing. A Sanedrin without the Seeing!"

For a moment the physician's mask of calm cracked and Dekker saw abstractedly that there was consternation

Burden of Mere Mortality on Venus a Heavy One!



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inside the man.

"It is unthinkable. We must ask you to decide."

"Is it quite certain that the Seeing will go?" Dekker asked after a silence. "Isn't it possible that—that there might be some mistake?"

"I'm afraid not. As soon as she was brought here after the accident we sent for the Pamia Ver. She is the best brain surgeon in the hemisphere today. She said—well, the prognosis is as I told you. It is impossible to intervene in the Pamia Dekker's skull without destroying the part of the brain tissue where the Seeing lies."

"She would not be affected other than that?"

"No, she would have all the ordinary human senses. Her eyes might be a little less sensitive to certain shades of red, that is all."

"And if she is not operated on?" Richard Dekker asked, still staring at his hands.

"She will die without regaining consciousness."

Dekker's mouth twitched. "How long have I?" he asked.

"A little more than an hour."

"Take me to my wife."

How could he decide, Richard Dekker thought as he looked down at Issa lying small and white in the hospital bed. They had taken away all the pillows, so that she lay quite flat on the hard mattress and her slight body scarcely raised the coverlet. How could he decide? He loved her, he wanted her to live. He wanted her to live! She was his wife.

But she was one of the Sanedrin too. Dekker had been married to her long enough to know, as the surgeon had suggested, a little of what that meant.

Once, the only time he and Issa had discussed it, she had tried to tell him what the Seeing was like. Faced by Dekker's profound basic lack of comprehension, Issa had been forced back on telling him what it was not, rather than what it was.

It was not sight, nor an extension of it, nor hearing, nor telepathy. It was

something different from, something greater than any of these. It was, simply, the Sanedrin Seeing.

And Issa had concluded, "I feel so sorry for you, Dick. Why, if I didn't have the Seeing I wouldn't want to go on living. How can you stand it? There would be nothing to go on living for."

Nothing to go on living for. How could he ask her to live without it? But he wanted her to live.

BLINDLY Dekker turned from the bed and made his way over to the window iris. Outside there was a broad stretch of emerald lawn where dark-skinned Venusians walked about sedately and a patient or two took the air.

Children ran about them, looking, in their bright clothing, as gay as butterflies. The prospect ended, as prospects on Venus always seem to end, in a little jetty built out into the surging foam-filled water of the turquoise sea.

While Dekker watched, a gentle rain began to fall from the rich clouds overhead. One patient was wheeled back into the hospital but the others stayed out, smiling with pleasure, and the children ran about more gayly than before. They were like little flowers refreshed by the rain.

There was no help here. He must go back to his decision. If only Megan were here it would not be so difficult. Issa's foster sister would surely know, much better than he, what was the right thing to do. She had a lifetime's experience of Issa—Dekker had known her only for three years.

But they had not been able to locate Megan yet and even when she was found she would be the width of the planet distant from Issa's hospital bed. It would take her many hours to come. Dekker must make his decision by himself.

Issa had not moved. She lay as still as death. Once she moaned and Dekker, though he knew she felt nothing, was stirred by a passionate pity. He wanted to gather her in his arms, to assure himself that she was still alive. He did not

dare even to touch her hand.

Even at the first Dekker had found something incredible in Issa's love for him. It had been a wonder, something to be received with awe and gratitude.

Now, looking down at her, so wan, so small, so remote, her ordinary dazzling fairness changed to a deathly white, he could not believe that the past had really occurred.

Had Issa really lain night after night in his arms in love? Had she conceived by him, given him a child? Was he really the father of a son by one of the almost-mythical Sanedrin?

Half-Sanedrin or not, young Dick existed. Momentarily Dekker's face relaxed, thinking of the boy. And since he existed, didn't that change things? Didn't that make it a little less selfish to ask Issa to live?

There was a rap at the door. The surgeon entered. "Your decision, Pamir Dekker," he said formally.

"Operate. Save her," Dekker replied almost absently.

The surgeon bowed. His face was completely inexpressive. It was impossible to say what he thought of the order. "Prepare the Pamir Dekker for surgery," he said to the nurse.

Issa was kept under narcotics after the operation for about one hundred and twenty hours. During most of that time Dekker and Megan sat in the hospital waiting room together. They had little to say.

"Did I do the right thing?" Dekker asked suddenly when their vigil was half through.

Megan turned to him. She was a warm brown girl of unmixed terrestrial blood, though her foster parents had been Sanedrin. "I think so, Dick," she answered slowly. "What else could you do? Any terrestrial would have done the same."

"But this is Venus. Would a Venusian? What if she hates me for it, Megan, after she's well?"

"She won't hate you, Dick, no matter what happens. She loves you too much."

"I'm afraid," Dekker answered. "I'm afraid."

ISSA came down the low staircase smiling. She smiled a great deal nowadays. Her silver hair had been drawn to one side in a deep scroll to hide the scars of her accident and her gown of silver tissue left her back and one alabaster shoulder bare. She was almost inhumanly beautiful. She looked as if she had been sculptured out of moonlight.

She came up to Dekker, still smiling, laid her white hands on his shoulders and kissed him. He turned a little dizzy from the kiss. When he released her she stepped back and smiled back at him again. It was kind of her to smile, Dekker thought, watching her with the frozen anxiety he had felt ever since he had taken her home from the hospital.

Or was her smile sincere? Was it possible that she was really happy? She had never been more tender, more loving than she was now. Was it possible that losing the Seeing had meant so little to her? The surgeon, at Dekker's request, had told Issa of her loss while she was still convalescent.

She had nodded, saying, "I thought that was it," and had not thereafter mentioned it. And always she smiled.

But Dekker had come into the room once unexpectedly and found her sitting huddled in a chair with tears running down her cheeks, her face a mask of misery. She had jumped up when she saw him and begun chattering gayly. He might have thought that he had imagined what he had seen except that her cheeks were wet.

And there were other things. Issa, before her accident, had loved the view from Neiriton, a low promontory near their home. Dekker himself had thought it pretty enough but Issa had insisted that it was extraordinarily beautiful. Almost every evening they had sailed there so she might enjoy it. Now she never wanted to go.

As an experiment Dekker said, "Shall we go out in one of the boats after dinner, Issa? We might sail over to Neiriton."

"Not tonight, Dick," Issa answered.

"I'm a little tired. Some other time."

Dekkar made no comment. After a moment Megan—she was on leave from her duties as field anthropologist in the Statira district—came in, murmuring apologies for her tardiness. They lay down on the dining couches. Issa pressed the button for dinner to begin.

They were halfway through the meal when Megan, leaning toward Issa solicitously, said, "You're eating nothing, Issa. Nothing at all. I've been watching you. Do try some of the soufflé. It's really very good. I gave the instructions for it to the robot myself."

"You worry about me too much, Megan," Issa answered lightly. "It's only that I'm not hungry tonight. I had such an enormous lunch no one could expect me to eat."

That, Dekker knew, was a false statement. He had been with Issa at luncheon and she had eaten nothing then, though she had played with her food and tried to make it seem that she enjoyed it. She ate less every day.

When the dessert came Issa got up from her couch—she moved beautifully, like a dancer—and walked over to the row of window irises. Through them one could look out over the garden and the little private wharf.

"It's going to rain," she said in the gratified tone in which Venusians always made such announcements. "But first we'll have an electrical storm. A really big one, I think."

DEKKER felt a tiny quiver of uneasiness. Fond as he was of Venus—he had wangled an appointment as oceanographer with the government even before he met Issa—he thoroughly disliked its electrical storms. They were perfectly safe inside the house, of course. Like all structures on the planet it was fitted with electrical diverters of high efficiency.

But the uncontrolled insensate elemental fury of a bad Venusian electrical storm always disconcerted him. Terra had nothing like that violence. As if to confirm him in his uneasiness there came a remote crash of thunder. It was

plainly many kilometers away but startlingly loud.

Megan got up and went to stand beside Issa at the windows. Her tawny skin and soft green gown set her in sharp contrast to Issa's moon-blanced loveliness. For a moment they stood side by side. Then Issa turned away.

There was another peal of thunder, much more close. "This is going to be a bad storm," Megan said to Dekker. "I've lived on Venus all my life but I never can get used to them. Listen to that!"

"They have their uses," Dekker answered perfunctorily. He was wondering why Issa hadn't wanted to visit Neiriton. "These storms fixate a lot of nitrogen."

"You sound more like an agronomist than an oceanographer," Megan answered, laughing. "Nitrogen fixation! It would take more than that to reconcile me—where's Issa gone?"

The hint of alarm in her voice alarmed Dekker. He looked up, startled. Issa was not in the room.

"She must have gone upstairs," Megan said quickly. "But I didn't hear her. I wonder if—"

A terrific thundercrash cut across her words. The room seemed to shake in a wave of white light. Megan whirled around to the windows. "She's gone outside!" she said in a startled voice.

Dekker started for the door at a run. Issa outside? She'd be killed, she'd be killed! He must bring her back.

Megan hurried after him. She threw her arms around him and tried to hold him back. "Wait, Dick, wait!" she said urgently.

"She's trying to kill herself!"

"No she isn't, Dick!" Megan was almost shrieking to be heard above the crashing of the thunder but her voice held such conviction that for a moment Dekker paused and stared at her.

"She knows what she's doing," Megan said more calmly. "Let her alone! She's one of the Sanedrin, Dick."

"Do you want her to be killed?"

"She won't be hurt. I've been watching her. I know her better than you do.

It's for her sake. Wait, Dick."

Dekker started toward the door once more and then haggard with indecision, halted. Megan took him by the wrists and drew him to the window rises. "Watch," she said imperatively.

Issa was walking with small light steps through the garden. Though the sky was alive with the crashing serpents of light she moved as surely as if she danced to inaudible music. Once the garden dissolved in a ghastly stunning flood of white light. Dekker smelled the phosphorus-like reek of ozone. He was sure Issa had been struck. But she moved on into the storm unfalteringly.

She reached the end of the jetty and walked out onto it. Numb with horror, uncomprehending, Dekker saw that her steps were quicker now. She was hurrying.

She came to the very end of the wharf and stood there for a moment, quiet, outlined against the boiling, foam-filled sea. Then her arms went up as if in exultation to the intolerable glory of the sky. To Dekker's incredulous eyes she seemed to wait, radiant and exalted, for the coming of some supernatural well-nigh intolerable delight.

Was she waiting or summoning? Her upraised arms seemed to call, to invoke. And after a second the answer came.

The heavens cracked apart. Light boiled, dazzled, stunned, annihilated. The ground shook. The discharge was so vast that Dekker pressed his hands tightly over his already closed eyes. It was like the end of the world.

CHAPTER II

Disappearance

WHEN he could see again, everything was dark. The air was filled with the steady hissing roar of torrential rain. The electrical storm was over. There was no sign of Issa anywhere.

Megan turned to face the door. "She'll be coming back now, I think," she said

with some confidence. She gave Dekker, who was looking at her blankly, a reassuring nod.

The door opened softly and Issa came in. Dekker's first impression was that she was taller than she had been. She was drenched to the skin, sodden, but she was almost blazing with vitality. Her eyes were wide and exultant, her lips curved in an irrepressible smile.

Dekker stepped forward. Now that Issa was back unharmed he felt a complex emotion toward her that was tinged with hatred.

"Why did you go out like that, Issa?" he demanded. "Were you trying to frighten me? You might have been killed."

Issa looked at him levelly. She was still smiling, as if she could not resist the need to smile. "I'm sorry that I frightened you, Dick. But killed? Oh, no. I—" She halted, then continued as if she had come to a decision. "Dick, I'm never going to die."

Dekker heard Megan draw in her breath sharply. For a long moment he stared at his wife. "Do you—what do you mean?" he asked at last.

Issa made a gesture with one wrist. "That I'm immortal now."

"Issa, Issa, you're not well, you're not yourself. Go upstairs and rest, darling. I'll call a physician, get a nurse."

"No," Issa said.

For a moment she stood confronting him. Their eyes warred and Dekker was defeated. It was then that doubt died in him.

"Sit down, Megan and Dick," Issa said a little absently. She spoke as if their behavior, after all, did not much concern her. "I'll explain it as well as I can."

"When I learned that I had lost the Seeing, Dick, I wanted to die. I tried to hide it from you because I loved you but I think you knew anyway. It was hard to hide."

"Everything I had loved was changed, was altered. You weren't the same, neither was young Dick. I couldn't bear to see the things I loved when I had the Seeing, like Neiriton. And the longer I

was without the Seeing the more I missed it. I didn't get used to it.

"Tonight I was nearly at the end of what I could endure. I still loved you, Dick, but love wasn't enough. I didn't see how I could go on living. And all the time"—Issa's exultant smile flashed out like light on a sword blade—"all the time I was talking heir to *this*."

"When the lightning began tonight I understood. It was odd how suddenly I understood. I went out in the storm to be nourished by it. I'm sorry that I frightened you, Dick, but there was never any danger. The lightning"—once more Issa's smile flashed out—"the lightning is my new food."

Megan put out one hand to her foster sister in protest and appeal. "Issa," she said very softly, "aren't you human any more?"

"Not in the way you mean," Issa replied.

After a moment's silence she continued, "Oh, I'm not quite invulnerable. Under certain circumstances I suppose I could be killed. But I'll never know sickness again nor weariness nor the slow, imperceptible aging of the tissues that leads to natural and inevitable death."

"I'll never again have to get energy in the crude way that human beings do—from the dead flesh of animals or by robbing plants of their stored-up food. And with these emancipations there goes something positive—I can't describe it—a continued increasing delight."

"I don't suppose you can imagine it. I couldn't. But what does it matter now that I haven't the Seeing? That was for human beings. Now I have *this*."

"When the Pamia Ver operated on my brain she did something more than she had intended to, something she would never have dared to attempt deliberately. With her knife she stimulated a portion of the brain which is absent in most human beings and dormant even with the Sanedrin, the portion of the brain which controls a higher metabolic life."

"Slowly that brain center awoke in

me and my body changed. Tonight I learned that I had become someone who could literally feed on the energy of the storm, on the lightning's flash."

"I feel remote from you now, Dick and Megan, though I used to love you both. There is an isolation in being as I am now which is not lonely at all but vast and joyous. I feel remote from everyone now except perhaps young Dick. He is my child and he is half Sanedrin."

"I'm sorry I can't help you, Dick and Megan. Since I used to love you I should be glad if I could give you the gift that the Pamia Ver's knife gave me. It is impossible. You are not Sanedrin. But for young Dick there is much hope. I mean to try what I can with him. If I can I shall give him"—Issa hesitated—"immortal life."

Dekker sprang to his feet. Because, at the bottom of all his passionate emotion, he was afraid, his voice was harsh. "Be quiet, Issa. You're not to go near Dick, do you hear? You're not to look at him, you're not to touch him. I forbid you to!"

ISSA inclined her head slowly in what might have been submission and assent. Without another word she turned and walked toward the stair. They heard her sure light steps as she went up.

Dekker turned to Megan, who had sunk back limply in her chair. "Is she insane?" he asked, a catch in his voice.

"Issa? Oh, no." Megan pressed her hands to her eyes and sighed deeply. "Get yourself a drink, Dick," she said. "You're shaking all over. Get one for me too."

When the tumblers were half-empty, Megan said, "No, she's not insane, Dick. You don't really believe that yourself. I think everything she told us was true. There's a story that the first of the Sanedrin, Ischachshar, lived for nearly a thousand years, you know. He was finally killed by one of his jealous children. The story says that he 'fed on light.'"

Dekker's hand shook so that the drink slopped in his glass. "It was horrible,"

he said, as if to himself, "horrible, to see her standing there with her arms up as if she were so glad.

"Have I lost her, Megan? I thought, after the operation, that she might forgive me and love me again. I knew she was Sanedrin but she was always human before. I can't believe that this—this thing has happened to her."

"You know it has, Dick," Megan said.

There was a silence. "I'm jealous of her," Megan said at last.

"Jealous?" Dekker said violently. He put his glass down on the table with a crash, his overstrained nerves finding a momentary relief in action. "Jealous? Because she's not human any more, because she's a sort of monster that can feed on the raw energy of lightning? Be glad you're human, Megan! Don't talk like that."

"Oh—who wants to be a human being, Dick? Are we so enviable? Our lives are too short, they're too limited. We're the slaves of time and however much we try to cheat, to fool ourselves, he has us on a heavy leash.

"We don't live long enough. The limitation of time lies at the heart of everything we undertake. I remember, when I was fifteen or so, how much I wanted to spend the next two or three years studying the flora of the Venusian salt marshes. There wasn't time enough. Since I wasn't intending to make botany my life work I couldn't, as we say, 'afford the time' to study the halophytes.

"We're never free from that temporal pressure, even in little things. We don't even read the books we'd like to read or listen to the concerts we'd like to hear because of that. And yet the world is so full, so rich, so varied, that a dozen lifetimes wouldn't be enough. How long would it take for us to understand and use and enjoy all that is rightfully ours? But we have only the one short life.

"And now Issa tells us that she's immortal. She won't even know sickness or age, which are a sort of death in themselves. Do you wonder that I'm jealous of her, Dick?"

"Do you mean that you'd like to live forever, Megan?" Dekker asked.

"Yes. Wouldn't you? Answer honestly, Dick."

There was a silence. "Of course I would," Richard Dekker replied.

DEKKER woke abruptly a little before daybreak. His heart was pounding. Even before his eyes were fully opened he felt beside him in the bed for young Dick and discovered that the boy was gone.

He knew then what had happened. He was already sick with foreknowledge when he went into Issa's room and found it empty. Some of her toilet things were missing and when he ran into the nursery he saw that young Dick's clothing and toys were gone.

Megan hurried into the nursery. She was still fastening the shoulder clasp on her thin green tunic and her hair was rough with sleep. "I heard you," she said. "Is something wrong?"

"She's taken him," Dekker answered. "They've gone. But where? How?"

"The wharf," Megan said quickly. "She must have gone in one of the boats."

They went running toward the wharf through a light morning fog that left Megan's hair diademed with drops of moisture. In the boathouse, when they reached it, the aquaglider and the cabin cruiser *Tryphe* were riding quietly at their moorings. But the quick little sailing sloop was gone.

"I've got to go after her," Dekker said. "I've got to find her and bring her back." He fell silent, wondering where, in all the expanse of foam that covered nine-tenths of Venus' surface, Issa could be.

"Do you *have* to go after her, Dick?" Megan asked slowly. "She's not a criminal. She loves young Dick. He's her own child."

"I can't lose him too," Dekker said almost desperately. "He's my child, too. Haven't I any claim on him? And besides, Megan, Issa isn't—isn't human any more. You heard her say last night how remote she felt from us. She doesn't judge things the way we do.

"The boy's only half Sanedrin. I'm

afraid that in trying to make him immortal she might—she might—he choked over the words, then, almost inaudibly, continued—"cause his death."

Megan's tawny eyes grew wide. After a moment she nodded. "Yes," she said. "All right. I'll go with you, Dick, of course. You'll make much better speed if you have someone to relieve you at the piloting. But I wonder where she can have gone."

"Not very far, surely," Dekker answered, thinking aloud. "She'd have taken the *Tryphe* if the place where she is going were a long way off. But a wind-powered vessel is perfectly satisfactory for a short trip and she always preferred handling sails to tinkering with a motor. She never liked the *Tryphe* very well."

"No, she can't have gone far—unless she's planning to sail into one of the Westerly Currents and let herself be carried along. Some of the currents are extremely fast. She'd make quick progress if she did that."

Megan was frowning intently. "I don't think she did that somehow. She's all alone and if she's planning to—do what you said with young Dick—she'll need equipment and supplies."

She frowned again, pressing on her cheek with one clenched hand. "Do you know where I believe she's gone? It isn't so far from here, either. To Hermeia, Dick."

"To Hermeia? Why should she go there? It's not a large city, not a metropolis."

"Yes, but it's the oldest of the Sanedrin cities, the first one they built when they became culture heroes for the rest of Venus. It's always been more Sanedrin than any other city and more of them live there than anywhere else. I think Issa would turn to her own people for help."

Dekker chewed his lower lip. "I believe you're right," he said. "We'll go to Hermeia after her. We'd better get busy loading supplies."

It was broad daylight when the *Tryphe* left the little pier. As they shot out into the turquoise water, their wake

breaking behind them into rich foam, Dekker felt his spirits rise. His anguish for Issa's loss—a loss that he knew now was irrevocable—was no less keen than it had been, but he was able to push it a little away from him. There was a chance, at least, that he would get young Dick back.

Megan, standing beside him in the bow, smiled up at him reassuringly. "Don't worry," she said, raising her voice to be heard above the hiss of the water, "he'll be all right."

"I hope so—Megan, when you lived with Issa's father and mother, what was it like?"

"Like?" Oh, they were very good to me, very kind. I loved them. Most parents are not half so kind and good. But they were strange too, Dick, you can't imagine how strange. The Sanedrin strangeness! Why do you ask?"

"It's young Dick," Dekker replied haltingly. "I was thinking about him. He—I—I love him. I'm proud of him. He's a beautiful child. But he's odd sometimes, much odder than Issa herself ever was."

"Do you know what she was doing before the accident? She was teaching him to read! He's not quite two, he can't speak plainly yet. But he can read simple sentences. I love him dearly, Megan, but I'm a little afraid of him."

"Sanedrin," Megan said comprehendingly. "Sanedrin!"

CHAPTER III

Pursuit

IT was deep dusk when they reached Hermeia. The greenish lights were already coming on in the streets. They moored the *Tryphe* at the public wharf for small vessels and set out through the hilly town, Megan leading the way.

Dekker saw, as they walked briskly through the lower streets, what Megan had meant when she said that Hermeia was more Sanedrin than other cities.

It was not that Hermeia was ancient, though the black basalt of its walls and buildings was eaten and pocked by time. What gave the city its particular flavor was the sense that time here was meaningless, that yesterday—and all the yesterdays before it—were coexistent with today.

The reflections of the street lights lay in oily greenish pools on the polished surface of the black stone steps as they went up. When they had gone high enough to see the harbor lying below them Dekker asked, "Where are we going, Megan?"

"To see the Pamir Shan," Megan answered a little breathlessly. She laughed. "I never thought of trying to get a car," she confessed. "There never seem to be any for hire in Hermeia anyhow. Besides, it's only a little farther.

"The Pamir Shan is an old man, very old, a historian. He was a close friend of Issa's grandfather. I've known him ever since I was a little girl. I think, somehow, Issa may have gone to him."

The Pamir Shan's house, set in a small moist garden, was quite dark, but Megan went to the door unhesitatingly. "He's not asleep," she explained to Dekker. "He doesn't need light for the Seeing." She rapped confidently on the door.

It was opened for them almost at once. The man who stood there was old, so old he had almost lost the typical Sanedrin fairness, but he was only a little stooped. He wore a long straight tunic of white byssa fiber and there were copper bracelets on both his arms. For a moment he peered at them uncertainly.

His face cleared. "I didn't recognize you at first, little Megan. You've changed. And that's Dick with you, Issa's husband, isn't it? Yes. Come in, come in. I'm glad to see you. I was rather expecting you."

He led them through the house to a study at the back. As he lit the triple lamp Dekker saw that the room, though spacious, was so filled with books, scrolls and tablets that the space available in it resembled a shallow cave scooped painstakingly from hard rock. Trans-

parent cases of objects and artifacts were everywhere.

"Sit down, won't you?" the Pamir Shan said courteously. "And you'll excuse me if I do so, I trust. I find standing rather tiring, at my age."

"Has Issa been here, Shan-ya?" Megan demanded directly. She was sitting on the edge of her chair.

"Yes. Early this afternoon." The Pamir Shan put his fingertips together and regarded the digits with some dissatisfaction. "I must be getting old, older than I realize," he said, as if to himself.

"How could I have failed to understand that something had happened to her? But I did fail, I thought only that she was looking remarkably well though a little remote. I was surprised that she could look so well, so contented, when the Seeing was lost to her.

"She sat there, in that chair"—the Pamir Shan gestured—"with her child on her lap and we talked. We exchanged news of our kith. Then she said that she had heard that I had written a paper on Ischachshar, the first of the Sanedrin. She asked me to let her read it and I got a copy from the shelf and gave it to her. I was a little flattered, I think.

"She read it, still with young Dick sitting on her lap. Once she laughed and said, 'You have made a mistake here, Shan-ya. I shall tell you about it some day.'

"When I asked her what she meant she laughed again. She gave me back the paper, saying it was very well written." There was a ghost of pride in Shan's voice. "We talked a little longer, and then Issa went away. After she left I found she had taken something with her. She had taken the key of Gwethyngrimm."

THE phrase meant nothing to Dekker. He looked at Megan and was surprised to see that under her tan her skin was very pale.

"The Key?" she said, almost in a whisper. "She took the Key?"

"Yes. It was in that case." Shan indicated one of the crystal-topped boxes.

Dekker could see that it was empty and the side was unlatched.

"I realized then what had happened and why she had taken it," the Pamir Shan went on. "She took Iwor with her too but that doesn't matter. What is important is that she has taken the Key. It is dangerous. You must go after her."

"Is my son in danger?" Dekker demanded. There was a dreadful cold feeling around his heart.

The Pamir Shan's lean shoulders moved in a tiny shrug. "I fear he is," he answered somberly. "But what hinges on this is greater than the life of any child, however dear.

"The Key is very powerful. It is a secret of the Sanedrin. When Issa stole it she stole what can change and control Venus' geodesic currents. Our planet is near the sun. The currents are strong. If the Key is misused"—the Pamir Shan hesitated—"Issa may cause movements in the crust."

Megan was biting the back of her hand. "I knew it was hallowed, Shan-ya," she said, "but not that it was so powerful."

"You are not Sanedrin," the old man said with the wraith of a smile. "We keep our secrets. But the worst of it is that I dare not send one of us after it. I dare not! It is a bitter confession to make.

"We Sanedrin have been good for Venus, I think. We have loved it and served it. Even if we didn't originate on this planet—and my belief is that we did—we have deserved well of it.

"It's the fashion among Venusians nowadays to laugh at us a little, to regard us as a little quaint, a little obsolete. But it is kindly laughter. They feel toward us as almost grown children do toward their parents. We do not mind. Good parents want their children to grow up.

"I mean, you see, that we Sanedrin have some reason to be proud of ourselves. We have served well, we have been selfless and disinterested. But we remain human beings and hence imperfect. What Issa has would almost tempt an angel. I dare not send a Sanedrin,

capable of becoming as she is, after her.

"They would coerce her if she did not give her gift to them willingly. And once they were immortal and fed on the everlasting food that Issa eats . . .

"Power corrupts. Even Issa, for all the remoteness I felt in her, may be corrupted by it. There would be strife among us Sanedrin then and fratricide and in the end—great power corrupts greatly—a Sanedrin dynasty. It would be a shame beyond all shames if we, who have done so much for our planet, should finish by enslaving it to us."

The Pamir Shan's lower lip quivered. Dekker saw that humiliation and fear had reduced the old man, for all his urbanity, almost to tears. "You must go after her," Shan finished. "You must bring the Key of Gwethyngrimm back.

"And now, Dick, Issa's husband, will you go outside? I wish to speak to little Megan alone for a while."

Dekker, waiting alone among the heavy perfumes of the damp little garden, noticed how still the air had become. Not a leaf stirred. They seemed weighed down with the air's oppression and heaviness.

Megan came out from the house. As they started down toward the harbor together Dekker asked, "What did he say to you?"

"He told me how to use the Key," Megan answered. "He told me how to find Gwethyngrimm."

WHEN they got back to the *Tryphe* she was moving up and down slowly at her moorings on a sleek oily swell. A wind had begun to blow steadily from one direction but its force was still so slight that the surface of the dark water was smooth as glass. Dekker thought it must be going to rain.

Megan led him into the cabin under the hanging lamp and got out the portfolio of charts. "I'll show you where Gwethyngrimm is," she said. "Shan-ya said it was all right to show you approximately."

"What is Gwethyngrimm? A city?"

"No, it's an island," Megan replied abstractedly. She was hunting for the

right chart. "It's the place where the Sanedrin first appeared on Venus. None of their historians has ever been able to trace them back beyond that—here it is."

She outlined a circle with her forefinger on the chart which, like most Venusian maps, showed little but the blue of varying tints which indicated water.

Dekker looked at the area Megan had indicated. "There's no land there," he said doubtfully.

"Gwethyngrimm's there though," Megan said. "Now listen, Dick. This is the way we are to go. We are to sail due east from Hermeia until we hit the Westerly Currents. We are to let ourselves be borne along on them for twenty-six hours.

"Then"—Megan hesitated—"Shan-ya told me to bind your eyes and do the piloting. But I am allowed to tell you that we will pick up a current which will float us straight to Gwethyngrimm."

"A current from here to here?" Dekker said incredulously. He indicated a spot on the intricate looping of the Westerly Currents and then pointed at the area in which Megan had located Gwethyngrimm. "There's no such current. I'm an oceanographer. I know."

"You don't know everything," Megan answered. She began to fold up the chart. "If Shan-ya says there is a current which will carry us to the island you can be certain that current exists." She put the book of maps back on the shelf. The up-and-down motion of the *Tryphe* was becoming more noticeable.

Dekker sighed. For a moment he pressed his hands wearily over his eyes. "Yes, all right," he said. "We've got to trust him. By the way, Megan, what is that Iwor he said Issa took with her?"

Megan smiled. "Iwor's a person, not a thing," she replied. "He's a young man, Shan-ya's grandson."

"A black sheep?" Dekker asked. Something in her tone made the question reasonable.

"No, not quite that. Jotor, Shan's son, had an affair with what Shan calls

'a worthless earth girl' and Iwor was the result. He hasn't force of character enough to be much of anything, either good or bad. Shan-ya told me once he should never have been born but he takes care of him and keeps him around to run errands for him. I suppose Issa thought he might be useful in the same way to her."

There was a rap at the cabin door. Dekker opened it. A man dressed in the dark blue tunic of Venusian officialdom was standing there.

"I'm the wharfinger," he said in introduction. He cleared his throat. "A storm warning is being issued to shipping. A tropical storm is approaching from the southeast. It is feared it will reach hurricane proportions. All small craft are urgently advised to stay in port for the next forty-eight hours. That is the warning. You have been warned." Dekker thought the man was reciting the contents of a bulletin verbatim.

"Thank you," Megan said. The wharfinger nodded and turned to go. They heard him scrambling up on the wharf again.

Megan and Dekker exchanged glances. "We can't wait," Dekker said almost apologetically. "Forty-eight hours is too long. We'll have to take our chances with the storm."

"I know, Dick. It's all right. I'm really not much afraid. Why don't you let me steer for a while? It's time you took a rest."

THOUGH the wind steadily freshened as the night wore on, Dekker hoped against hope that the *Tryphe* might escape the worst of the storm. A little before dawn he realized that he was wrong.

The sky, instead of showing the usual pearly luminescence which dawn brings to Venus' layers of perpetual high clouds, had taken on an ominous greenish tint. Discolored and livid, with streaks of sinister yellowish orange, the sky looked as if it had been bruised. Nearer the zenith heavy storm clouds were beginning to form.

Megan, who had been sleeping on the

cabin settee, got up and stood beside Dekker. "I guess we're in for it," she said, picking up his unspoken comment. A rain flurry rattled sharply against the cabin's crystal hood. "Is everything tight?"

"As tight as I can make it. The *Tryphe*'s really a pleasure craft."

"I know." Megan yawned and shivered. "I wish it would hurry up," she said. "I'll make us a hot drink. I hate waiting for something unpleasant to start." She busied herself with the galley stove.

Megan had not long to wait. By the time they were drinking scalding theobromine from thick mugs, the little *Tryphe* was pitching so it was difficult to stand. The trace of the barograph had been going down steadily. Now it was almost vertical.

Dekker gulped down the drink and handed the empty mug to Megan. The rain was coming down in blinding horizontal sheets. Head forward, eyes narrowed, he tried unsuccessfully to peer through it. It drove against the cabin's hood with lunatic violence.

He could see nothing—there was no visibility. The sky was gone, wiped out by an element that was neither water nor air. Even the waves, like moving hills, he perceived more by instinct than by sight.

The mere noise of the storm terrified. It seemed to beat on the brain physically. The intelligence was stupefied, benumbed by it. Indescribably loud, hungry, shockingly malevolent, it was the voice of a disembodied but implacable hate.

Megan was clutching the stanchion to stay upright. Her lips were white. Dekker knew what was in her mind. In a storm of this magnitude there was always the danger of a *changasa*, the unpredictable erratic monstrous single wave to which Venusians gave the name of "shipwrecker." Since Venusian waters were kilometers deep the *changasa* could attain, in theory, irresistible height and violence.

Dekker was fighting to keep the *Tryphe* on her course. As long as she

could meet the waves bow on she would be all right. Her motors were running steadily and she was as buoyant as a cork. But if she got even a few degrees off . . . His wrists were beginning to ache.

The *Tryphe* was climbing up one glassy slope and down into the trough of the next undauntedly. Once she was too slow and the roaring green closed over her. She fought her way up through it gamely, staggering like a boxer who won't quit. Dekker smiled faintly. He felt proud of the little craft.

His wrists and shoulders ached with weariness. As his fatigue increased he tried to force himself to greater attentiveness. But by now, though it was nearly ten in the morning, the world without the *Tryphe* was enveloped in a maniacal twilight. If he could only see!

Once more the *Tryphe* lurched up too slowly on the swell of the wave. Dekker waited expectantly for her buoyancy to reassert itself, for her brave push up through the dark water. The moment lengthened. The ship seemed to hesitate. And then, with a sick shudder, Dekker realized that he had let her get off course.

He wrenched wildly at the wheel. It was too late. The wave was on them even now.

CHAPTER IV

Gwethyngrimm

IT went right over them. They went down in a welter of crashing thready blackness, the *Tryphe* reeling far over on her side. Dekker was sure for an instant that she was going on over. Painfully she came upright once more. Dekker tugged frantically at the wheel. The *Tryphe* seemed to gasp, to perk—she no longer responded to her helm.

Dekker knew instantly what had happened. The port turbojet had been stripped by the wave. The center and

the starboard jets were still functioning but that left the *Tryphe* as badly balanced as a bird with only one wing.

His hand darted to switch off the starboard turbo. He was relieved to find the *Tryphe* handling normally once more. The difficulty was that the reduction of her power by two thirds left her with very little 'way with which to meet the storm.

The next wave hit them broadside. Again there came that thready, roaring blackness like the beginning of unconsciousness. But cutting the two side turbos had added minutely to the ship's stability. She came upright a trifle more quickly. Dekker, his face dripping sweat, was able to get her back on course.

Megan had half-slid, half-climbed to the sail locker. Now she stood beside it holding the huge byssa hoops of a sea anchor in her hand. Dekker grinned approval at her quick-wittedness but shook his head sharply as she approached the cabin door. A sea anchor would help the *Tryphe* a great deal in her crippled state. But it was beyond the possible to rig the anchor now.

None the less the storm was abating. The sky was perceptibly lighter, the waves less high. The stunning noise was dying into the rush of an ordinary storm.

Though Dekker knew it meant nothing more than that they were approaching the area of uneasy calm which lies at the dead center of a hurricane he welcomed the respite. It would last for perhaps twenty minutes. In that time he could put the sea anchor out and might be able to repair the turbojet.

Abruptly the *Tryphe* emerged into an unnatural calm. The sky was leaden, the choppy wavelets black. The sudden cessation of noise and fury made it seem as if the ship had slid into an abnormal vacuum.

Turning the wheel over to Megan, Dekker went outside. He rigged the sea anchor so that the craft was headed in the opposite direction. When the storm began again the wind would come from a new quarter. Then, leaving Megan to

rig another anchor from the stern—she had been handling sailing craft ever since she was five and was quite as competent a seaman as he was—he went back into the cabin and plunged into the oily intricacies of the turbojets.

He found, as he had feared, that the port jet was beyond repair. The wave had twisted its stout metal vanes into a crushed mass. The *Tryphe* carried spare parts but a new turbo would take hours to install. They would have to get through the second half of the storm with only the center jet.

He went back outside. Megan had rigged the stern anchor to her satisfaction and was now engaged in making a minute adjustment on the one from the bow.

He stood watching her for a moment, conscious of his more than physical fatigue. It was curious what a relief he felt in watching her—quick, graceful, intent—as she worked.

What made him look up? It was not that the sky had darkened—it was already dark. Nor was it noise—the *changasa* is soundless. Perhaps a breath of air fanned his cheek, perhaps it was a warning from the enigmatic force we label instinct. Dekker looked up to see an Everest of water off the bow.

For a fraction of a second he could only stare at it, fear submerged in a gigantic awe. Then he threw himself on Megan—there was no time to warn her—and hurled her to the deck.

He clutched one of the cleats on the *Tryphe's* deck with each hand. Afterwards, he found four semi-circles in the flesh of both his palms where his fingernails had driven in. He groped with his toes for another cleat and found it. His hope was to pin Megan so firmly between his body and the deck, to glue his body so closely to hers, that even the *changasa* could not wash her overboard. It could be nothing but a hope.

THERE was a noise now, a very low roar. Dekker found time to wonder, ironically, why the cosmos thought it necessary to use so much power to destroy two tiny sentient atoms like

Megan and himself. It was absurd, like using a sledgehammer to crack nuts. And then came the wave.

It was indescribable. Dekker was only semi-conscious most of the time. He fought for breath and strangled endlessly. Under the tons of water his bones were bent like wax, his flesh felt like bruised sea kelp. Once there was a pain in his left arm, a pain remote and unimportant beside the terrible frustrated need for breath. But always something in his mind kept repeating tonelessly—hold on, *now hold on*.

The wave passed. Dekker drew his body feebly away from Megan and tried to sit up. When he moved salt water came from his mouth and nostrils in a great gush. He leaned on his right arm, head drooping, and vomited. His left arm was useless. He thought he had broken the radius and the ulna. He was too exhausted to have any emotion at being left alive.

He looked down at Megan. The wave had torn her tunic from her shoulders so that she was naked to the waist and she did not seem to breathe. When he pulled her over so that she faced him he saw that the whole left side of her face, from the temple to chin, was raw. Her shoulder was one great bruise.

The wind was beginning to spring up. In a time so short that seconds would measure it, the *Tryphe* would be entering the second half of the storm. Almost at the end of his strength, Dekker half-pushed, half-dragged, Megan toward the cabin. He saw with passionate relief that she had begun to breathe. By the time he got her to the door she was co-operating feebly.

Once in the cabin, he got a hypodermic syringe from the aid chest and gave himself an injection of glucose. He followed it with anti-histamine taken orally. As his head cleared he repeated the treatment on Megan—she was lying on the settee breathing in shuddering painful gasps—and ended by plastering salve on her raw, oozing face. Then he turned to steering the *Tryphe* through the second half of the storm.

That time, as he remembered it aft-

erward, was a nightmarish blackness shot through with bright white flashes of pain. Periods of mental torpor seemed to alternate with feverish intellectual activity.

Part of the time, when his arm hurt worst, he was simply light-headed. He remembered complaining petulantly to Someone that They were unreasonable in expecting him to steer the *Tryphe* through a storm like that when he had only one hand. Steer her somehow he did. The two sea anchors were a great help. Somehow the *Tryphe* got through the storm. He and Megan were going to live.

They lay for nearly twenty hours under the calm heavens, while the ship drifted idly, and slept and rested. Dekker replaced the ruined turbojet and when Megan was able she set his broken arm. The aid textbook open before her, his unbroken arm for a guide, she pulled and prodded and compared until the bone was back in place again.

Throughout the process she was as calm and efficient as a hospital nurse. But when the arm was safely inside a splint Megan burst into a flood of wild tears. Dekker was oddly pleased though he could not have told why.

As soon as he was able Dekker picked up the course and headed the *Tryphe* due east again. They had lost time but not as much as they would have if they had waited out the storm in Hermeia at anchorage. On the second day they reached the Westerly Currents.

For twenty-six hours the *Tryphe* was borne along on the swift smooth-flowing blue water. Then Megan bound Dekker's eyes and took over the piloting. He had no idea where they were or how the ship was moving. On the fourth day they came to Gwethyngrimm.

It was not in the least as Dekker had expected it. In his mind had been the picture of a city, an old city like Hermeia, set on a low green island in the water. He had thought they would find the physical traces of habitation—buildings, houses, wharves, docks—however deserted and ruinous. But Gwethyngrimm looked not only as if it had never

been inhabited—it seemed that it could never have been habitable.

IT was a vertical island, made of wild and jagged rock masses piled one on top of another toward the heavens haphazardly. There were fantastic aspiring towers and pinnacles, slender Gothic spires, pointed minarets. The rocks were of all colors, red and green and brown, orange and cinnabar slaty blue.

In the center of the island the jagged rock mass went up and up and up. Dekker followed it up with his eyes, from pinnacle to pinnacle, and found that its top was actually hidden from sight by a wisp of cloud.

They sailed around the island twice, hunting for a place to anchor, before they discovered a tiny almost-land-locked bay. On the smooth water inside, the little sailing sloop Issa had taken was riding at her mooring. So they knew that Issa was on Gwethyngrimm.

Dekker took the *Tryphe* into the bay very carefully for fear of submerged rocks. He made her hawser fast to one of the jagged rock points that came almost to the water's edge.

"The island must be volcanic," he said to Megan, who was standing beside him on the deck. "Volcanic, and then very much eroded. Didn't you say, Megan, that this is the place where the Sanedrin seem to have originated on Venus? Here? I don't understand it. How could anybody, even Sanedrin, live here?"

"Yes, they began here," Megan answered. "How it was"—she shrugged—"nobody knows. Nobody knows."

Dekker scrambled ashore and helped Megan out. For a moment he hesitated. In the waste of rock around them there was no sign of a path. Then he turned and began to lead the way up.

They had climbed for perhaps a kilometer, with many back-trackings and retracings, when Issa appeared.

She seemed to come out of the rocks. Even in the full light of day her flesh was faintly luminous. And Dekker saw without surprise that her feet were not quite resting on the rock.

"I saw you coming," she began without preamble. "I am sorry you suffered so much in the storm. But why have you come to vex me? Why could you not leave me in peace?"

Dekker stepped forward. His heart was pounding hard. "I want my son," he answered. "I want young Dick."

"I gave birth to him," Issa replied. "I love him too. Can you not understand? No, I see that you cannot. Very well then, I will show him to you. And then you must go. I will not be disturbed."

Without waiting for a reply she turned and began to ascend. They followed toilsomely behind her. Now and then she stopped and waited for them to rest. They came at last to a shallow platform, scarcely more than a ledge of rock. Behind it was the round opening of a cave.

"He is inside," Issa said. "But"—she spread her shining arms out across the opening as if to bar them—"you are not to touch him. Do you understand? If you touch him he will certainly die."

She lowered her arms. Dekker and Megan went within.

For a moment Dekker could see nothing. The cave—it was round like a bubble blown out of rock—was full of dim lights and shadows that flickered and moved. Then he made out, against the other side of the chamber, two bluish clots of luminescence. Conduits went from them to half-seen enigmatic apparatus, to switchboards and keys. And between the lights, lying on a pallet on the rock, was young Dick.

Dekker's mouth opened in horror. He heard Megan, beside him, cry out. For a moment he was unable to believe his eyes. Could this be young Dick? What had turned the happy, healthy child he remembered into this inert pathetic nearly-fleshless huddle of bones?

He turned on Issa furiously. "What have you done to him?" he demanded, his voice breaking with anger and despair. "Have you killed him? Is he dead?"

"Oh, no. This is necessary, Dick. There must be a period of katabolism

before the anabolic phases can begin. He is not suffering. He knows nothing. And there is little danger. Only if he is moved or disturbed."

"But how can you run the risk?" Megan asked. Her face was pinched with distress. "How can you bear to see him look like that? Your own child?"

"How can I?" Issa laughed. "Come outside, Dick and Megan, and I shall try to show you."

CHAPTER V

The Key

AS they went toward the entrance, something moved among the shadows at the back of the cave. Megan started. "What was that?" she demanded uneasily.

"That? Only Iwor," Issa answered. Her tone was indifferent. "He has been helping me. Come outside, Megan and Dick."

She led them along the ledge for perhaps fifty paces and then stopped. "Stand here," she directed. "No, you, Megan, farther over. So."

Megan shrank back a little, looking down at the rock before her feet. "You are using the Key, Issa?" she asked.

Dekker followed the direction of Megan's eyes. In the rock there was a shallow depression, perhaps a meter wide, and at the center of the depression a hole. A shaft of translucent metal came up out of the hole and seemed to run away again into unknown depths.

At the upper end of the metal shaft, resting on it and spanning the depression in the rock from side to side, was a shallow salver-form basin of thick crystal. The basin was filled to the brim with some liquid, transparent as water but much more alive, whose surface was puckered into a thousand tiny ripples and eddies and waves. They sparkled and shone in the light until the surface of the liquid seemed to laugh.

Against one side of the basin, floating

on the liquid, was a heavy metal disk. Its surface was oddly channeled and undercut and at one side a network of shining greenish lines had been inset. It must, Dekker thought, be the Key of Gwethyngrimm.

Issa stooped and touched the surface of the disk. With the tips of her long fingers she turned it infinitesimally. It seemed to move with difficulty, as though the liquid in the basin resisted it. As the disk moved Dekker thought he felt the faintest flutter of vibration in the air.

"Yes, I am using the Key," Issa said, straightening. "I have learned much about it, more than old Ischachshar ever knew—but I brought you out here to show you why I do as I do with young Dick. Stand quietly, both of you, and think of nothing. That makes it easier for me."

She put her right hand on Dekker's forehead, the other on Megan's head. At the touch Dekker felt a warm electrical thrill ripple over his skin. Issa's fingers moved and shifted a little as if she were studying, through the bones of his skull, the very contours of his brain. She halted and nodded. Then she pressed the heel of her hand down lightly toward his eyes.

It was as if some strange and powerful circuit had been closed. Dekker felt vast alien energies stir in him. His heart had begun to beat in mighty thrusts, like a giant's heart, and his limbs seemed to expand, to mingle with light, to grow glorious. Such joy flooded through him that his body could hardly contain it. He wanted to shout aloud in exultation, to raise his arms in delight to the heavens.

And he saw with sudden lucidity that what was called life was only a qualified kind of dying, that he had been chained, until this moment, to a body that rotted and fell into decay even while it moved and breathed. He was alive now. He was an eagle, long caged, whose wings had at last been given to the air. He was free.

Issa took her hand away from his head. "The bone in your arm is knitted, Dick," she said. "And Megan, your

shoulder and face have healed."

Dekker, still dazed with what he had experienced, looked toward the girl. The immense mottled bruise on her shoulder was gone. And the skin of her face was smooth and glowing. He began to fumble with the knots of the bandages that held the splint of his arm. But he knew before he undid them that the break had knitted, that the arm was sound and whole.

"What did you feel then, Megan?" Issa asked.

"I felt—" Megan halted. There were tears in her eyes. "I felt—" she began again, then spread her hands in helplessness. "You know what I felt, Issa. You eat an everlasting food. Immortal Issa! Is it like that with you?"

"Yes, always. And now do you understand, Megan, why I take the risk that I do with young Dick, with my own dear child?"

"I understand," Megan replied slowly. "Whether it is wrong or not I cannot blame you. No one who ever lived could do otherwise."

ISSA nodded. For a moment she studied them. "I loved you both once," she said. "Dick was my husband, Megan my sister. Before you go I should like to give you a gift.

"I cannot give it to Megan. Her brain is different from yours, Dick. Did you notice that I took my hand more quickly from her head than yours just now? If I tried with her I should kill her or leave her an idiot. But I can do something for you.

"Not immortality. That is not possible. But I can give you two hundred or two hundred and fifty or three hundred years. Years of life as you felt it just now. Two hundred years and always with that same delight. Come, Dick, will you accept my gift?" She smiled at him and raised her hand again toward his head.

Dekker felt a honey-sweet blaze of anticipation run through his veins. He was almost faint with the burden of his longing and his delight. It would be his, all his—the time, the space, the years

filled with radiant more-than-human energies. All for him, all his, Issa's wonderful incredible gift. His!

But a part of his brain was putting a question, a question he didn't want to hear and yet couldn't help hearing. *What about Megan?* the question ran. Reluctantly Dekker turned and looked at her.

She was smiling at him. Her whole sweet brown face was alive with happiness at his good fortune. Only her eyes were shadowed and a little sad.

Somehow her look made Dekker remember how she had lain on the deck of the *Tryphe* after the *changasa* had passed. She had been so small as she lay there, so frail and broken. He had been dreadfully afraid she was never going to breathe again.

And at the recollection something strange awoke in Dekker, something limited and merely human and melancholy, something that made all Issa was offering him not too important, not too hard to reject.

There would always be regret, he knew. As long as he lived a part of him would ache with bitter severed longing toward what Issa was offering him and what he was giving up. It was hard to surrender that starlike happiness and delight. But he could do it. He turned toward Issa, his mind closed to regret.

"I am grateful to you, Issa," he said formally. "But I must refuse the gift."

Issa looked at him blankly. For a moment her isolation and indifference were pierced. "But—why? Why not?"

"It's Megan," Dekker answered. "I can't take what you could give me, Issa, if she can't have it. She'd be alone."

"Does she mean so much to you, then?" Issa said incredulously. "For one woman, nothing but a human being, you would give up three centuries of more than human life? Think well, Dick, of what you are doing. Is she everything to you? Do you love her so much?"

"I don't know about that," Dekker said awkwardly. He had turned a dull red. "But I couldn't take it without Megan. It wouldn't be fair."

Issa's face was illumined by a won-

derful tenderness. "Bless you, then," she answered softly. "Bless you. I see I had forgotten the strength of human love.

"And now, before you go, come into the cave and see young Dick again. He will waken in a little while. Before he awakens you must be gone."

She led them back into the cave, past Iwor, who was standing by the entrance. Dekker had a fleeting impression of a slack young man, dark of hair and eye, whose face was molded in lines of childish petulance. Then he was looking once more at his son.

"Why—he's much better!" Megan cried. She looked unbelievably at the child lying between the two pale clots of light. "What is happening? He is not half so thin as he was!"

"He is in the anabolic phase now," Issa said in explanation. "His body is building up again." She turned a switch and the blobs of light died away. "Your fears were foolish, you see. All is going well. All will be well.

"And now you must go. He will wake soon."

MEGAN hesitated. "Shan-ya sent us after you, Issa," she said. "He was afraid of two things. He was afraid that you would misuse the Key, that you would set up strains in the planet's crust. And he was afraid that you would use the Key to give immortality to others of the Sanedrin. He was greatly afraid of that.

"He told us to bring the Key back to him so that those two things should not happen. Shan-ya is old and wise, Issa. He was much afraid."

"Tell him this," Issa answered, "that I will bring the Key back to him in a little while. And he is not to be afraid. I promise that I will be careful, that the Key will not be misused. And I will never help anyone except my own son, Dick, to eat the everlasting food.

"Tell him that. The two things he fears will not happen. Good-bye now, Dick and Megan. And—what is it earth people say?—good luck."

Dekker and Megan started down

through the maze of rock. They had gone seventy or eighty meters when the sound of a voice raised behind him made Dekker turn.

"But you promised, Issa," Iwor was saying petulantly. His voice was high and whining. "You promised, you know you did. You said that if I'd help you with Dick you'd make me immortal too."

"I promised nothing," Issa said with rather chilling indifference. "You have misunderstood."

"But you said—do you mean you won't give it to me, after all the trouble I've been to with Dick?" Iwor's voice was thick with self-pity. "After all I did for you? You lied to me!"

"I have not lied to you. You lied to yourself," Issa said remotely. "You were deceived because you wished to be deceived.

"Even if I could make you immortal—and I cannot—I would not do it. You are not worthy. Be quiet, Iwor. I dislike your voice."

Dekker watched for a moment. The episode seemed to be over. Iwor was leaning against the rock wall, his body stiff with sulkiness and discontent. But he appeared to have accepted Issa's dictum, though ill-humoredly. Once more Dekker and Megan started down.

They had got nearly halfway down the slope when Issa screamed. It was a beautiful terrible sound, wild and inhuman, that might have come from a bird's throat. Dekker, his heart pounding in sudden fear, spun around.

Iwor was stooping over the basin where the Key floated, the Key that controlled Venus' geodesic currents, the Key to Gwethyngrimm. Every line of his body expressed triumphant spite. He put out one hand and wrenched strongly at the key.

Once more Issa screamed. From the rocks under Dekker's feet, seemingly originating in layers of instability many kilometers below, there came a low grating roar. As the noise drove toward the surface from those black grinding depths it grew louder and changed to a furious bellowing. And Gwethyngrimm shook.

Dekker threw his arms around Megan to help her keep her feet. There was another shock and another and another. The rock pinnacles around them were moving in a fantastic crashing dance. On the far side of the island Dekker saw that a cleft had opened and the sea was pouring in.

A wave of searing heat drove toward him. His hand went up instinctively to shield his face. The air near where Iwor was standing moved in blistered shifting waves. A ravenous heat was pouring from the translucent metal column on which rested the basin and the Key.

Heat and something much more than heat. Iwor had remained stooped above the basin, his hand stretched out. Now his body seemed to shrivel up and grow dim. As Dekker watched he slipped gently and weightlessly over on one side. His body lay for a moment against the rock. Then it fell atom by atom into nothingness.

ISSA was hesitating on the ledge, almost wringing her hands. With a throb of anguish Dekker realized what was in her heart. Young Dick was still in the cave. It might yet be possible for her to save her son. She could certainly save herself. But unless the Key were turned back to a neutral position, unless the forces Iwor had wakened were hushed again into sleep, Venus would be shaken to the core.

Her people would be scourged by earth shock and fire rains and tidal waves. There would be a horrible harvest of destruction and death. Every second increased the sure calamity. Issa's own immortal flesh must be sacrificed to turn the Key.

"Run!" Issa screamed down to them, her voice breaking on the note. "Run! I can't save Gwethyngrimm!" She gestured imperatively at them. And then, her white garments fluttering around her, she leapt toward the metal column. The last Dekker ever saw of Issa, the memory he had left to take with him, was of her stretching out her hand undauntedly through the consuming radiation to turn the Key.

When perhaps two kilometers of boiling sea separated the *Tryphe* from the island Dekker looked back. There was nothing left of the fantastic sky-touching rocks of Gwethyngrimm except a lonely monolith. And even as he watched, it broke off and crashed into the raging sea.

They fled then, fled for many days and nights through nightmare and insanity. The skies above them rained down ashes, the black sea steamed and seethed and sent up geyser jets. Dead fish floated belly up around their prow. The steaming air was foul with sulphur reek.

They fought their way through at last to clean skies and calm blue seas. When they had left the Westerly Currents and were sailing west again to Hermeia, Megan said, "You must not grieve so, Dick. The boy—young Dick—he felt nothing, I am sure. He died in his sleep." She laid her hand lightly on his to comfort him.

"As for Issa," Megan went on after a silence, "as for Issa—" For a moment her voice broke, and Dekker saw that her lips were trembling. But when she began to speak again her chin was high and her voice was filled with pride.

"What Issa did was nobly done and well. We must not grieve for her. She died for others. She died as befitted one of the Sanedrin."

"I know," Dekker replied slowly. He looked out over the blank surface of the blue sea, thinking. How could Megan understand what he had lost? Issa had been his wife, his first love, but it was much more than that. She had been at the last to him like some regal star burning in the heavens—strange and remote in her immortality—but lovely, bright.

Her death had left a part of the sky darkened.

Issa was gone.

But Megan was smiling up at him. Dekker bent over and kissed her soft warm mouth. He had Megan. They were together. And together, not too sadly, they would take up the burden of mortality again.

THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 7)

partnership as yet—but give them time. Certainly they are well on the way.

Two Schools of Thought

There are, of course, two schools of masculine thought and feeling anent this comparatively recent development in stf. One school withdraws into crusty male resentment toward feminine invasion of yet another masculine sanctum sanctorum. The other prefers mixed singles and/or doubles and makes no bones about it.

Personally, as our readers have doubtless gathered by this time, we belong to the latter group. It is our belief that this female uprising, inrush or whatever it may be termed is entirely in line with the world-trend toward woman's emancipation and equality that has endured at least since the fiery pronounciamientos of Mary Wollstonecraft and her companions.

The girls have won Nobel Prizes, Senatorial seats, Gubernatorial incumbencies and corporation directorships. They have served as front line soldiers, as day laborers, as top executives and horse trainers, as test pilots and parachutists. More and more they have been accepting the toil, the danger and the responsibility of our era, along with its Hollywood contracts and beauty prizes.

It occurs to us that when the first extra-Tellurian frontier is attained it will not for long be an all-male affair. If something big is going on, be it on Mars, Venus or Gany-mede, the girls will be in on it.

We rather envy the space pioneers of the future in their lack of solitude. They may at times grow weary of that inner tension which drives some women to talk for talk's sake. But overall they're going to have a lot more fun than pioneers of the dismal past.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

WE are making the first change in the format of this department in many years—as of right now. Instead of including our previews of important stories to come in the next issue in this space, we are assigning them a spot of their own under the title SCIENCE FICTION FORECAST.

This is in accord with a good many reader requests over a considerable period of time. We hope it meets with general ap-

proval. To find its location, look for SCIENCE FICTION FORECAST on the contents page.

And now for the letters—which look extremely lively and are headed by a trio of author-epistles, beginning with

ASIMOV AZIMUTH

by Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor: As one of the older and creakier fans in science-fiction (age 30) I hesitate to poach on the preserves of youth and write a fan letter. I have not done so in eight years.

Still I cannot help but notice the number of letters that begin something like this: "I am new to the stf. field, having started reading your magazine yesterday, but such and such a story is terrific, slobber, oomph, blisk—"etc., etc., etc., all in capitals. Very nice, but after the fan has been reading a long time, say a month, he'll be moaning about "the good old days." This is life among our youth of today, if you'll pardon the philosophical reflection.

I, myself, however, am not entirely new to the stf. field, having been reading it for twenty-one years and writing the stuff (after a fashion) for eleven years. I'm sort of jaded and cynical. I'm embarrassed to be caught slobbering over a story. Much more so to be caught slobbering over every damn novelet in your August, 1950, issue.

I picked up said issue to read on the train trip from New York to Boston and had an extremely pleasant time. "New Bodies For Old" by Jack Vance was a de Camp-type story that only the maestro himself (L.S. de C., of course) could have bettered; and "As You Were" by Henry Kuttner, and "The Weariest River" by Wallace West were both very entertaining and pleasant to read.

Thank you. "Nuff said. I'll keep quiet for another eight years.—762 Broadway, Somerville 44, Massachusetts.

We find that right friendly, pardner. And add only a fond hope that we can keep your salivary glands in a state of bi-monthly over-excitation, Isaac. Come to think of it that last letter you wrote us wasn't a fan letter but a mild and thoroughly justified beef over our spelling your name Azimov instead of Asimov. Confidentially we like it better with the z.

FROM THE AUTHOR'S MOUTH

by Jim Blish

Dear Editor: While AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT is, I will readily grant, a story that I should like to have written, the credit for actually doing so belongs to Arthur C. Clarke. No doubt 2,228 other readers will call this to your attention too, but this at least gives me another chance to express my admiration for the Clarke story.

It's interesting that his title and mine should be so similar both in wording and in import. I think it's possible that mine came from his. The creative process works in mysterious ways.

While I'm here, let me clear the air a little on my professed distaste for parapsychology. My feeling when I started LET THE FINDER BEWARE! was that there probably is no such thing as telepathy or the other psi effects. I'm still inclined to think so—just as I think there is really no such thing as a werewolf. However, both subjects posed very pretty problems for stories—the old, old problem of science-fiction writing: how to impose a rational structure upon an impossibility. Solving that kind of problem is always fun. Whether or not the writer personally believes in the impossibility is irrelevant, as I see it.

It's a matter of temporary acceptance. The reader must bring something to the problem, too. Suppose one believes personally that there is no such place as the Inferno Dante described; nevertheless, one must accept its existence temporarily, while reading the first part of the poem, or else enjoyment of the poem becomes impossible.

After all, 99% of the places described in science-fiction have no real existence, and 100% of the situations described in any fiction are unreal!—171 Pelton Avenue, West New Brighton, Staten Island 10, New York.

Hey, we could argue about your last sentence, Jim, but if we really got going anent the reality versus the unreality of fiction we'd have no space for anything else in this department. We agree with you entirely, however, as to the nature of the basic science fiction problem being the impossibility of a rational structure upon an impossibility. Or perhaps it is merely a plausible structure that is needed. The semantic difference is thin.

For those who have not written in about our error, Mr. Blish's fine werewolf novelet in our April issue was called **THERE SHALL BE NO DARKNESS**. Mr. Clarke's memorable novel of the far-distant future, entitled **AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT**, appeared in our companion magazine, **STARTLING STORIES**, November, 1948.

BLITHE BEEF by William F. Temple

Dear Editor: I see that in the current TWS you're still crowing over the way you plowed me in English history. All right, you know your history—that's apparent from your editorials, footnotes and stories. You're a bit shaky on sf though. Look at that footnote to Ruggles' letter in the same ish. (p. 146).

For some reason the Blish novelet, **AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT**, seems to have kicked up a bit of a fuss with a number of readers for various reasons. Personally we thought it a lulu of a were-wolf yarn. . . . (For some reason, I forbear to comment on your sentence construction, for various reasons.) That's nothing to the fuss Arthur C. Clarke will kick up when he finds his favorite brain-child referred to as a "lulu of a were-wolf yarn."

However, the rest of the issue where you haven't flat-footed around is quite passable, tho' there seemed to be something missing. I think it must be W. F. Temple. I've not had an opportunity to write any more sf since the 2 stories I sent you a few months back which you promptly turned down. Still, next month I hope to escape from the Stock Exchange for good and start the trash-machine really rolling—unless I'm out there learning Korean or sump'n.

Meantime, I jes' sits back and lets my agent sell my **FOUR-SIDED TRIANGLE** novel in country after country. It's appearing in 4 languages now: English, French, German—and Americanese. Why bother to write more novels, anyway—why not just sell one over and over? Now tell me I keep selling you the same story over and over!—7 Elm Road, Wembley, Middlesex, England.

Maybe you have the right idea about not writing any more novels, Bill. Remember, we read the work in question. Seriously, I hope you will soon come up with a full-lengther that we can purchase for \$5—or something shorter for the pages of this magazine. With which we'll let you go back to counting your ill-earned royalties.

P.S. Arthur Clarke is just about the only person, involved or otherwise, from whom we have yet to hear in regard to our bloomer of page 146, August issue. We'd like a few stories from him as well.

LOST by Stan Holman

Dear Ed: A couple of days ago I was taking inventory of my sf collection and found that the issue for February, 1947, was missing. I hunted high and low for it and finally came

to the conclusion that it was either thrown out or went into another dimension. So if you happen to have a spare copy I'd be glad to purchase it from you.

It is important to me because I have all of the Kim Rendell stories (or rather, I HAD all of them) and this one has **THE MANLESS WORLDS** in it. I'd be grateful for any help you can give me.—326 Cleveland Avenue, Trenton, New Jersey.

We don't have any spares on file, Stan, so we're doing the next best thing and turning it over to the readers. You should be hearing from at least seventeen dealers and swap-conscious fans about it—we hope, it says here.

Let's see, the February, 1947, TWS contained, outside of the novelet mentioned above, **TROUBLE ON TITAN** by Henry Kuttner, **A MATTER OF SIZE** by Samuel Mines, **THE PLEASURE AGE** by Joed Cahill, **SWEET MYSTERY OF LIFE** by John Russell Fearn, **JUKE-BOX** by Woodrow W. Smith and **COME HOME FROM EARTH** by Edmond Hamilton.

Not too bad an issue at that. We wish Cahill would write us some more stories but have seen nothing else from his typewriter, before or since (sub-title for this episode—**WHY EDITORS GO CRAZY**). Also, unless memory fails (and it doesn't—we just checked), some fans will be intrigued to know that Woodrow W. Smith is another to add to the burgeoning list of H. Kuttner pseudonyms.

TOO LONG—TOO LONG! by J. O. Curtis

Dear Editor: I'm an old sf reader—started in junior high in 1926. **AS YOU WERE**, **NEW BODIES** . . . **WEARIEST RIVER** and Ley's article all very good in August issue. BUT—**FOURTEEN PAGES OF READERS' LETTERS ARE TEN TOO DARNED MANY!** Can't you afford another ten-page story?—831 Delaware Avenue SW, Washington 4, D. C.

Sure we can afford it. Let's you and our readers fight this one out. Thanks for kind words otherwise.

ABOUT A. K. BARNES by Captain Kenneth F. Slater

Dear Ed: Haven't written a letter to the editor of recent date owing to frantic trading activity. Have heard of death of Arthur K. Barnes in April. Could you supply me with some detail for an obit in my magazine, **OPERATION FANTASY**? He was very popular with old-time British fans.—Riverside, South Brink, Wisbach, England.

Hate to disappoint you, Ken. It was not our Arthur K. Barnes who died but some other writing Joe in Pasadena, not far from where the author of **FOG OVER VENUS** and many other stories and co-author of the Pete Manx and Hollywood-on-the-Moon opera lives. Or so he has informed us recently. For which, huzzah!

OUCH! by Judson Vayles

Dear Sir: Reference to **THE WEARIEST RIVER** (August,

1930. TWS)—if Wallace West will check any standard work of material culture I think he will find that the safety pin was invented in the early Bronze Age. In brooch form it was especially popular in Ancient Rome. Even the Germans, the Britons, the Gauls and suchlike savages had the safety pin in Caesar's time.—No address given.

The worst of it is we have a very definite feeling that Mr. Vayles is right. Oh, well . . .

THE SUMMING DOWN

by Jean Bryant Bogert

Dear Editor (Mutton—Alice: Alice—Mutton?) I think this is the first time I've written to TRS in about ten years (next time we'll hang onto the envelope so we shan't lose your address—Ed.). Possibly it was before your term of editorship. I like TRS as much as any of the stories, thanks to you. Keep up the good work.

Re the August issue—as usual the letter section was good (in the Battle of the Sexes I'm for women since I am one) I disagree with Bradley (nee Zimmer) and McCain is mistaken when he says male stff readers show their brains in marrying nitwits—they have overgrown egos.

Your editorials are far more interesting than the average and on a par with the better stories. I had the same notions re Flying Saucers as you had—two minds with but a single thought? This letter is disjointed. I'm listening to Scheherazade, drinking iced tea and slapping mosquitoes, so the results are a little odd.

Stories were (August issue):

1—AS YOU WERE. Kuttner kept me in stitches. At times he reminds me of Thorne Smith.

2—WEARIEST RIVER. Didn't Wallace West write the Pete Manx series? They also involved time travel.

3—A WALK IN THE DARK. The last line was the point. Brrrr!

4—SPACEMATE. It was like a copy of M. St. Clair's STROLLER—but not quite so good.

5—NEW BODIES FOR OLD. Fair but the people were too predictable.

6—BATTLING BOLTO. LRH can do much better.

The article was good. I like Mr. Ley's work but then rockets and some allied subjects interest me. Do you mind my giving some verdicts on earlier issues? I hope not. Here goes anyhow. June issue—

1—PRECOGNITION. A little gem. New writer? (moderately so—Ed.)

2—THE PILLOWS. St. Clair at worthy work. If she would only abandon Oona and Jick. (she has—Ed.)

3—REVERSED MAN. One thing—did Nelson survive or die? A good tale. (as we remember it Nelson just went—Ed.)

4—NO HIDING PLACE. Better than some of CC's. Wasn't that the title of a book about the A-bomb at Bikini? (Golly, methinks it was!—Ed.)

5—SUNDAY IS 3,000 YEARS AWAY. A little involved but the idea was pretty good.

6—COFFINS TO MARS. A slightly casual tale with much human interest.

7—STRANGE BEDFELLOWS. Rather a silly tale.

For April the choices ran—

1—CARNIVAL OF MADNESS. Bradbury de luxe.

2—THERE SHALL BE NO DARKNESS. A fine story, developing a theme and idea like that. More Blish, please!

3—JOURNEY FOR SEVEN—Characterization and story good.

4—NOCTURNE. Unusual tale.

5—TIME CASE. The only trouble is that the theme is so familiar.

6—PLANET OF THE SMALL MEN. I wish ML would get out of that rut. His tales all seem the same.

7—LITTLE JOE. One of the poorer ones in the series.

8—BORGHESI TRANSPARENCY. Not stff, which by itself is all right, but it seemed rather dull and trite.

And for the February issue they were—

1—GREATER CONFLICT. A good story, a fine finish to a good series.

2—PAYMENT IN FULL. Unpleasant but good Bradbury.

3—DANCING GIRL OF GANYMEDE. One of the better Bracketts. At times, earlier in TWS, she seemed overinfluenced by E. R. Burroughs' Mars series. I do like swords though.

4—VOICE OF THE LOBSTER. Kuttner has done better.

5—DEAD RUN. Not as bad as some.

6—THE SKEPTIC. Good idea, well written, made me laugh.

7—SPECTATOR SPORT. An old theme and rather tedious.

8—WHEN TIME WENT MAD. I nearly did so too. FAKIR used to be good. What happened?

That's about all for now. For your information I am 27, not pretty but uninhibited to some extent and left-handed.

We would have to lose that address. For your information we are 40, not pretty, uninhibited to the extent the law allows and also left-handed. Write us again in spite

of the somewhat discouraging cryptic quality of several of your critical comments. Better yet—give SS a run-through without the iced tea.

TIMEWORN TRAVEL

by Joe Gibson

Dear Ed.: It's interesting to compare Kuttner's AS YOU WERE with West's THE WEARIEST RIVER. Kuttner turns out a fine piece of writing on an old theme, giving it his own well-developed treatment; it should be a good story. However, one quality is missing. He didn't have anything fresh to add to the time-travel theme, but merely gave his version, in his own style, of what's already been said.

On the other hand, West has kicked the time-travel theme around, come up with a combination of ideas on the subject that seems more logical to him. And he weaved a yarn around them that depicted them logically. His style wasn't as good, but his story was better. His ideas were as ancient as Kuttner's, but he gave them a fresh approach. Kuttner merely used time-travel to push his dramatic plot along. And the plot suffered.

Pleasantly puzzling, that Clarke short. The hero is approaching the landing field, he hears the landing-field tractors, and then comes "the rattle of monstrous claws" ahead of him. But there's nothing to indicate positively that the tractors had steel caterpillar tracks.

Haven't the least idea what Ley's future articles are about, but here's a suggestion: explain to him, please, that the books he writes could be published chapter-by-chapter as magazine articles before book publication, and that any stff magazine should be gleefully joyous to have same. What I mean is, insist.

I agree with your comments on the flying saucers, plus a few additional suppositions. As a new type of military aircraft, they're just different enough to demand quite a few years' experimentation before their capabilities and limitations and the best design and materials are known. Therefore, they're still probably in the X-class; it would be foolhardy to even admit their existence until they're fully developed and at least one Air Group is organized. Also, the subsequent effect on commercial and private aviation makes for interesting speculation.

But flatly labeling them military secrets at this stage is like flatly denying the possibility of time-travel. Other mild speculations are just too darned intriguing. Scout ships of an interstellar expedition? Might be! Or maybe even from an unknown, highly developed, alien civilization right here on Earth! Could be some intelligent species has been spawning and building cities and fighting wars on the ocean bottoms while we did same topside. Yeah, interesting as all get-out.

Of course, an editor's trouble is that he's in between scoffers who don't appreciate any sort of speculation and the wide-eyed clan who persist in taking all speculation seriously. Purely mild speculation often gets twisted out of all proportion.

We're down to basic factors on this mystery/science-fiction fracas. Don't want it to get monotonous, but I'm determined to make my point clear. Your mystery novel—and I wish you'd given its title so I could read it—with the miniature platinum armies of the Russian Czar might have had a hypothesis. If those priceless little rascals actually motivated your story. It could be done, and very rarely is because, in other fiction besides stff, it's almost unbelievably paradoxical.

Now, if these little rascals merely served as an excuse for your forces of good and evil to go to work on each other, they were mere artifacts of your story, not a hypothesis. A presumed, fictitious gem resembling the Hope diamond might have sufficed as well. But if these Czarist armies prompted your good-evil forces by, let's say, the power of suggestion to use the same tactics, comparatively, that were employed against Napoleon in Russia, then they would constitute a hypothesis. See what I mean?

In short, a mere spaceship wouldn't make a science-fiction story. You could have handsome hero battling space pirate for control of said spaceship and it would be nothing more than proton-gun adventure tripe. But make it an interstellar ship, figure in the Fitzgerald effect and light-year distances and have all that affecting your characters' actions, both good and evil—Hubbard called it TO THE STARS; Van Vogt called it CENTAURUS II; Heinlein called it UNIVERSE. . . .

This men-versus-women controversy has a couple of interesting facets. I would agree that women haven't had comparative professional equality long enough to have proved themselves, one way or the other—except in acting. Their theatrical status has been on a par with men for quite some time, and they've certainly proved themselves both equal and, as Astra says, "lasting." It would seem that she's right in implying that the feminine viewpoint is much more concerned with immediate situations, while the masculine preference is the longer view, the past and future State of the Union.

But while we whet our wisdom tooth on man's immortal

thoughts, it's nice to have the fresh sparkie of immediacy too, which tends to make it just as immortal. I wonder if this is why many female writers find juvenile fiction (no derogatory term, here) easier? Psychologically, children live in an "immediate" world. Of course, I've heard that "women are much better prepared to understand children's problems and to write about them" and I simply don't believe it. Extreme mother love has spoiled too many brats. Not that fathers are any better, I hastily add.

And the above statements do not mean that I dislike children.—24 Kensington Ave., Jersey City 4, N. J.

The title of the book in question is **MURDER IN MINIATURES** and it is currently in print by Harlequin Books (a pocket-sized reprint outfit) in Canada. We haven't the slightest idea whether or not it lives up to your hypothesis there or not.

Glad you agree on the Saucers and we agree on the Willy Ley. As for the fimmales, we've already had our say this time out.

CONDEMNER CONDEMNED by C. Stewart Metchette

Dear Editor: Ouch! A fellow Canadian scifantasy fan writes to you, dear Mutton, and condemns the low character of James Bligh for resurrecting one of Man's better forgotten superstitions. I suggest very seriously to Helen Soucy that she use the facilities of the Port Colborne library and check up on the following text-books of ESP and PK, two divisions of a common subject, parapsychology: "New Frontiers of the Mind"; "The Reach of the Mind"; "ESP After 60 Years"—by Dr. J. B. Rhine of Duke University; "Wild Talents"—Charles Fort; "Beyond Normal Cognition"—J. F. Thomas.

"Science and Psychical Phenomena"—G. N. M. Tyrrell. The Rhine books are the descriptions of the years of parapsych experiments at Duke and are very detailed as to methods and results. Fort's tome is his usual collection of odd incidents culled from all sources. Thomas likewise, but attributing the phenomena to scientific basis. Tyrrell's work goes into the psychic field.

The up-to-date knowledge and progress of parapsychology, in all its sub-divisions can be found in the Journal of Parapsychology, available at any University Library.

For fictionalized applications of ESP and PK, Miss Soucy should get Lewis Padgett's "Baldy" series, A. E. van Vogt's "Slam!" or "Weapon Shops of Isher" (TWS Feb., 1949), and James Bligh's "Let the Finder Beware!"

If werewolves are unscientific, then why does such an impressive institution of learning as Duke lend its facilities to the probing of parapsychology in an attempt to solve and understand various phenomena, as unusual as werewolves? Perhaps telekinesis, psychokinesis, callidetic ability and telepathy are all "trash!"

As a former Ganichim SFS member, and a compatriot of both the East Swayback Calcimine insurgents and the Otterid group, I found Frying Pan enjoyable for the first time since its inception. You deftly ilk the thin epidermi of the Otterids with your dissection of their Machiavellian letter. Who do you think you are, Ray Nelson?

Stories? Heh heh, didn't even notice.—c/o 3555 Edison, Hillsdale, San Mateo, California.

We'll leave the werewolves alone this time out—though frankly we have always had a hunch that, given the prevalence of any sort of suggestion, from vampirism to the Oedipus Complex, a certain fringe of screwballs will always convince themselves they are victims or practitioners and will occasionally manage to put on a convincing show.

Frankly we regret the lapse of lycanthropy in modern America. 'Twould offer a welcome change from our routine and ghastly sex crimes.

BETSY GO BRAG! by Bob Johnson

Dear Lem: I have been wrestling with myself (difficult,

as you may imagine), and finally the best/worst (take pick) half won.

Before going into the rating of stories, etc., I would like to speak my piece on Betsy Curtis' verses. This gal may or may not have a future, poetically speaking, but part of that Ode to Bradbury was really of the best butter. Parts of it were in fair to middlin' taste, but one or two parts in particular gave me pause enough that I couldn't help myself and just HAD to write you. First masterful phrase:

"Blind Homer leads blind Milton through the press
To feast amid the topless towers of Oz,
Where Mary Shelley pours th' ambrosial cup,
For Alice, Poe, young Hamlet and the rest."

This, Lem, is it! This is good! If you never print another "poem" in TRS, still will I be satisfied.

I realize this isn't ego-boogie for TRS but bear with me, please. I seldom let down my hair this way with an editor, even you, Mutton, dear, but this cannot be helped. I am overcome! The line I specially like is the one anent the "topless towers of Oz." How true! For all fans, in their later years, the towers of Oz crumble into dust. To the age of ten or twelve, to the budding young fan (he doesn't know it yet, but he's beginning that climb to the stars) Oz is all the things yet unattained, the things we'll be.

And then, as we grow older, the fairy towers crumble, and we are disillusioned.

I'm just now reaching the stage where disillusionment begins, and the towers crumble and fall—where Alice's scented rushes fade and disappear. Betsy has restored a bit of "Oz" to me, and I am grateful. I have almost the whole set of the books and still buy one occasionally. But it's fading, slowly but surely. My questing mind asks "why?" and I am left alone.

Egad! I'll have you in tears, soon! Enough of this sobbing in my beer. And besides, it tastes better undiluted.

You noticed the lack of your favorite (?) adjective, "poignant" in the molderdramatic episode above. Even though I may sound like a sick calf, I won't go that far!

Now, to the stories! And what a conglomeration! AS YOU WERE: "B-". Very little to comment on. Cute plot. That's about all. The ending saved it.

NEW BODIES FOR OLD: "A-". Durn good story. For once the elements of the plot weren't wooden. A great many of them had form, emotion, and good action. Jack writes very unevenly, and you're never sure whether you'll like a story or not until you read it.

THE WEARIEST RIVER: "B-". Not bad at all at all. A nice variation upon a theme. This will never be classic; nevertheless, a pleasant, light bit of reading that left you feeling happy and un-depressed.

BATTLING BOLTO: "A-". I'm always a sucker for a "gimmick" and this one was even better than usual. LRH is undoubtedly the king of the fiction plotters. There are kinds of other types, too, but you can't beat a Hubbard plot.

SPACEMATE: "A-". For a while there, I was sure this was going to be one of those "menacing-alien-often-poor-defenseless-human-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah" things, in fact, brought out the tricky ending even more than if it was more smoothly written. This was undoubtedly the best story in the issue.

A WALK IN THE DARK: "C". Gimmick or no gimmick, ugh.

ROUND THE WORLD BOMBER: "A". Best part of the mag this time in the fact and fiction departments. Well written, informative material like this should be printed more often. Really Lem, and this is meant in a most friendly manner, you've GOT to improve your zines! Admittedly your cover was better than usual, but only one "A" story or article, tch, tch, tch, tch, tch. I grieve.

I've followed you faithfully for quite awhile, now, and I will continue to do so. But the main reason for a magazine's existence is so it can improve upon a given field. At the moment, at least in this issue, TWS is hanging on by the skin of its 22 fangs.

And now the poem: (just to make sure both you and the printer make sure of rejection)

And Ode is in Order to poor Mr. Mutton;
For fannish entanglements, he is a glutton;
He must be a busy man, reading our tripe,
And over our poems (?) he must raise a gripe.
He must be quick witted, quite jolly and gay,
For if he were not, he'd go crazy that way!

—811 9th Street, Greeley, Colorado.

To which we can only reply in kind (or most salubriously unkind)—

Whatever makes you think we're sane,
To us the opposite is plain.
Did we not suffer jangled id,
Psychotic trauma of ibid,
We'd never, moved by hate or love,
Publish tripe like the above.

We hope you're kidding about our hanging on by the fangs. Our bridgework won't take that for long.

THE REDBURN VIEW by Doug Fulthorpe

Dear Editor: This is my first letter to your magazine and I would like to congratulate you on turning out two fine magazines. I rate TWS and SS the best fantasy magazines in publication. I have been a fantasy fan since I was seven (am now sixteen) but during the war had to rely for my literary entertainment on prewar issues of U. S. mags, of which I was given a large number, and on what little was published in Great Britain.

In fact it is only since August, '49, that I have been able to purchase American fantastic literature—but since then I have bought many back issues of U. S. mags and now have most of TWS and SS published since January, '48.

The five best stories I have read since then are—

1. SEA KINGS OF MARS—Leigh Brackett.
2. AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT—Arthur C. Clarke.
3. HAPPY ENDING—Henry Kuttner.
4. AND THE MOON BE STILL AS BRIGHT—Ray Bradbury.
5. THE MOON THAT VANISHED—Leigh Brackett.

Other stories deserving honorable mention are MR. ZYZZYVZ GOES TO MARS, A BLADE OF GRASS and MIRACLE TOWN, although the last-named seemed to have a very familiar plot (Are you there, Bill Temple? Ed.). The CONQUEST OF SPACE series by Rene Lafeyette is very good, as is the series by Raymond F. Jones, which commenced with THE ALIEN MACHINE.

Of the 1950 issues I have TWS for February and April, SS for January, March and May, and find them excellent. Worth mentioning is the improvement in the covers. If they are by Bergey (they are—Ed.) they are certainly not in his old style and are a great improvement. I see that Captain Future has returned and am pleased accordingly. Although far from being a CF fan I like to read one of these space operas occasionally.

Finlay is good as ever but Astarita's stuff, with one or two exceptions, is poor. Anyway, I'm glad to see that Orban is working for you. THE READER SPEAKS and THE ETHER VIBRATES are indispensable features of these magazines. I find the letters both interesting and witty (yoo—and hoo, Doug—Ed.), as well as honest and unpretentious.

Two gripes—the Hall of Fame in SS seems dull and out of date as well as serving no useful purpose. And don't row any more Oona-and-Jick stories.—Redburn View, North Shields, Northumberland, England.

We're ahead of you on both gripes, Doug. The HoF in SS is dead in favor of our reprint magazines, FANTASTIC STORY QUARTERLY and WONDER STORY ANNUAL. And Oona and Jick are currently a concluded series. However, we miss them. Do any of the rest of you?

RISK OF REPETITION by Ricky Slavin Kater

Dear Editor: At the risk of being repetitious I shall repeat that each issue of TWS becomes better and better. The August edition was even more superior to other pubs than usual. To the fans who seem to think I am a one-woman cheering section I can also dish out criticism when needed.

AS YOU WERE—Hank makes good use of his background knowledge of Hollywoodia and turns out a good novellet. Sorry to say it is not exactly what I expect from him but even so it alone was worth the purchase price. When are we going to get some C. L. Moore? (Whenever Cat writes us something—Ed.).

NEW BODIES FOR OLD—Vance may not be long on human psychology in crisis, since there is a little too much smoothness in the behavior of his characters under duress—but he has managed to turn out a fine story none the less. More please.

THE READER SPEAKS—Methinks you do have something there about our Flying Saucers despite the crop of jokes about same. I guess that's about all.—1618 Coney Island Avenue, Brooklyn 30, New York.

Goodness, that was quick, Rickey! You can go right on being a one-woman cheering section as far as we are concerned—as long as you dish out your criticism only to

other fans as promised above. Please keep them coming.

MILLIONAIRE by D. H. Cohen

Dear Ed: I'm feeling like a million dollars. A letter of mine was actually published in THE READER SPEAKS! Incredible, impossible—but it happened and I'm taking you at your word and picking up my courage to write again.

Thanks to the letter and to you I have received quite a large mail from the U.S.A., Canada and the British Isles, letters which I have answered to the best of my ability. Through them I have found a number of new friends, with whom I am in constant correspondence. I'm also receiving sf mags here from the U.S.A., that great rarity in England.

I sincerely thank you and my American friends for publishing the letter and for sending me the literature I so relish. I would like to add a few words about a convention to be held in London in 1951, to coincide with the Festival of Britain. The guest of honor will be L. Sprague de Camp and the name of the convention will be EUCON. So, fans here's a chance not only to see the Festival of Britain but also to attend the first European Convention of sfans.

A word on the May issue of STARTLING. WINE OF THE DREAMERS was a great novel. It had that atmosphere of knowing what was going to happen next. I like my stories this way.—32 Larch Street, Hightown, Manchester 8, Lancashire, England.

It is always heartening to anyone in our position to learn that his column is not only read but acted upon. We're as delighted as you are in your new-found friendships and hope their circle continues pleasantly to enlarge itself.

Best wishes for the EUCON (beast of a title, that!) and we feel certain that L. Sprague will handle himself with rare aplomb on that occasion. Our only fear is that someone will mistake him for Sir Anthony Eden and heckle him from the floor. However, he doesn't heckle easily, so that is of small matter.

SAUCER SPECULATIONS by Robert Marlow

Dear Ed.: Glad to see you are interested in Flying Saucers. So am I, but it seems that reports of their activities are becoming fewer and fewer. I liked your Editorial very much although I don't exactly agree with what you say. I would, if you shall so permit, like to give my opinion on the matter, but first:

This is my first letter to your magazine, though I have written to your companion magazine (SS). I am a more recent Science Fiction fan and you will probably hear from me from time to time. I am also a writer, (in my spare time) and would like to know if you would recommend me to try my hand at Science fiction. Now, back to Flying Saucers.

The reasons why I tend to believe that Flying Saucers are not of earthly creation are:

1. The Flying Saucers (as it has been announced by fairly reliable sources) have been clocked at acceleration greater than the human body can withstand. (The human body cannot exist at acceleration greater than nine gravities, unless some recent discoveries have made it possible. Flying Saucers have been clocked at 20 gravities acceleration.)

In view of this fact we can assume that it is very unlikely that the "Disks" are operated by human pilots. It is known that smaller creatures can withstand greater acceleration than humans, so that midget-sized humanoid might easily operate the Saucers.

2. What of radio control? The paths and activities of Flying Saucers have been recorded by accurate machines, so it has been reported, of which reports we have no reason to doubt, and we are told that they have reached a degree of maneuverability which seems possible only by direct pilot control.

We have received reports through various magazines of a pilot who, while in flight, encountered a Flying Saucer. He reported to his home base that he was going to follow it. His next report was that he pursued it, but it accelerated and remained at a constant distance from the airplane.

The plane decelerated and so did the saucer. The plane followed the Saucer as it climbed, dived and circled, as if

trying to evade its pursuer. The pilot next radioed home that he was going to approach the saucer, and get a good look at it. He waited for his opportunity and rushed in. No further report from the plane was ever received.

Persons living in the vicinity of the plane's last reported position had recalled having heard an explosion about the time that the plane made its last contact with home base. Pieces of metal and machinery were found in that area and could have been airplane parts. What happened we can only guess. The Saucer may have feared an attack and destroyed the plane. The weapon used would probably be a gun of some sort.

We can consider the following: the maneuverability of the Saucer was almost beyond radio control, for the Saucer would have to have a radar or television device with which the operator could see the pursuing plane, and plan maneuvers accordingly. It would prove very difficult to sight a gun at speeds where sighting a gun is difficult at best of times and then with the clumsy radio control on top of that. Of course we might have a gun which automatically aims and fires at pursuers.

If the disk was from Russia or any other area over one-hundred miles from the accident area, a T. V. Unit, or Radar would function very poorly, if at all, over such a distance. If the operating station was in the near vicinity, it would have to be operated by spies, for the U. S. Government or the Air Force would not destroy a valuable airplane and pilot to protect a secret, no matter how confidential it was. It would have been easier to let the pilot learn what he could and then ask him to keep the secret.

If the airplane had crashed into the Saucer, wreckage identifiable as belonging to the Saucer would have been found. As it was there was none. Or maybe the Saucer was built to withstand the impact. If the plane had gone out of control and crashed, the wreckage would be more centered around one spot, rather than scattered halfway across the state, as it was. Also, the pilot would have had time to report his peril, which he didn't do. If the radio had failed, he may have had time to bail out, but the evidence has it that the crash came swiftly.

Some skeptics would have it that the pilot attempted to attain such a great speed that the air resistance shattered the plane and scattered the pieces over the countryside. No pilot in his right mind would exceed the danger point in his speed range even if the plane were capable of such speeds. If he wasn't in his right mind, then he would never have been allowed to take the plane aloft.

3. If the Flying Saucers are from some other country, such as Russia, what are they doing over the U. S. A. and Canada where they might be observed, maybe even captured? Or if they are American property what are they doing over Sweden, England and other countries (for the same reason)?

4. A famous newscaster, a short while ago, reported that the first Flying Saucers were seen at the close of the nineteenth century, although we haven't any evidence other than the reports made in the "Logs" of two ships which had no opportunity for conspiracy. Captains of ships are under a sworn oath to write only what in their eyes appears to be the truth, in the "Log". We cannot overlook these reports.

5. Unless the reports made by different persons, who have recorded or seen the Saucers, are false, jet propulsion is not the power used. Commander MacLaughlin of the U. S. Navy reports that radiation propulsion is used.

I don't really believe that the Discs come from another world, but I cannot believe that they come from Earth. I find it hard to believe that they even exist, but let's hope they are from Mars.

About other matters in the August issue: AS YOU WERE was good, but rather far fetched. Time travel stories don't exactly appeal to me, for if time travel were ever to be possible, why haven't people from the future visited us? NEW BODIES FOR OLD was different and was one that I had trouble putting down, once I started it. Jack Vance is a good writer.

BATTILING BOLTO was alright but could have been better. SPACEMATE certainly had a surprising finish, but the illustration spoiled part of the glory. As soon as I read the description of a Sirian I knew that Myra was the Sirian in disguise, but I never suspected Jim was one, also.

I don't know why you bothered with the article by Willy Ley, unless it was just to fill space.

THE WEARIEST RIVER was good. Just the kind I like in spite of the time travel. A WALK IN THE DARK was O. K. too.—Invermere, British Columbia.

Those flying things certainly have you in a tizzy, Robert. You "don't really believe the Discs come from another world, but . . . can't believe that they come from Earth." You "find it hard to believe that they even exist, but . . . hope they are from Mars."

Let's try to figure that out. Not from another world—not from Earth—but you hope

they're from Mars. Not from . . . Cut it out, you've got us in a veritable tizzy too.

At any rate and notwithstanding we are happy that you found the August TWS on the whole palatable. Not from Earth, not from Mars . . . Pfui!

HOORAY AND A HISS by Del Close

Dear Lemmy: I suppose I ought to congratulate you on not having a single bad story in the issue. That is quite a triumph. Hooray, bravo, and huzzah! But there wasn't an outstanding story either. Hiss, boo, bah! But they were all extremely readable.

AS YOU WERE, by H. K. Hmmm. Nice and different, but the switches and confusion got a little boring. But amusing.

THE WEARIEST RIVER, by Willy West. Interesting, but since when is (a), (b) and (3) a series? Okay, so I shouldn't quibble over trifles. But I didn't especially care for the confusing of Shakespeare with gen-yew-ine history. Willy should have known better than that. And am I mistaken when I notice that Cicero quoted someone that wasn't born yet? Oh, well. It was fun to read.

I was disgusted to discover that I had guessed the trick ending in SPACEMATE. I like to be surprised. But it was nicely done, anyway.

A WALK IN THE DARK, if short on plot, was long on mood. Gad!

Willy Ley was welcome back with a most interesting, if disquieting, article. With that, I discover my exit cue has come along, so cheerio for the present.—1726 Poyntz, Manhattan, Kansas.

So you think West confused Shakespeare with history—and had Cicero quoting the unborn. We checked the latter and found nothing wrong. A great deal of what sounds like very hep modern chatter was prevalent in the very old days. As for Shakespeare, he derived much of his speeches and dialogue for plays like *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* and the *Antony and Cleopatra* opus not only from such Roman playwrights as Terence and Plautus but from such commentaries and historians of the time as Suetonius, Pliny and, of course, Plutarch.

So perhaps Fra West was not so far off the historical beam at that.

OH, TO BE IN HOUSTON . . . by Ed Lacy

Dear Editor: I rarely make it a practice to get into the "readers' column" of the s.f. magazines—in fact, this is my first. But this is for a very special reason: the herding together of any and all s.f. fans, human and/or non-human, of the Houston area for the possible organizing of a s.f. club. It's hardly an original idea, but not by any means—short of the black arts—have I been able to find any s.f. club in Houston or in the area.

There are fans in Houston, I know; a few I know personally. And there must be a great many others . . . the magazines in the stands seem to sell well. So crawl out from under the rocks, and out of the holes: let's organize!!! Too darn often we s.f. fans are introverts, and just don't get to know each other. In Houston let's correct that!!! Drop me a card, or phone (WO-5702) . . . I'll try to take it from there, and get the ball rolling toward that first meeting. Houston should produce the biggest and best outfit in the whole bloomin' statell!

So Editor, what say putting this in so Houston can get started with a bang!!!—6923 Schley Street, Houston 17, Texas.

Well, why not. Are you there, Mr. Wigodsky? In fact, are you human?

HOLLYWOOD NOTE by Les and Es Cole

Dear Sir: We've just seen "Rocketship X-M" and thought

we'd give you our impressions. With that odd admixture of childish maturity Hollywood seems to revel in, she's turned out a passable—but just—siff film.

We were impressed with the correctness of the scientific data as far as it went. It didn't go too deeply, but we've gotta remember, the brotherhood of siff notwithstanding to the contrary, the picture was designed for the lay public.

However, we did not like or we wonder about:

1. The effects of gravity's neutralization in deep space. It seemed to be present just for the convenience of the actors. And did you notice that it caused no problems in locomotion?

2. The "pilot" (dubbed by us, "switch-puller"), the "astronomer" ("worrier"), and the "engineer" ("Ha-ha-hal"). These three were just plain jerques. They, and especially Noah Berry, Jr., had absolutely no *raison d'être* and were, we felt, in very poor taste. Must we have comic relief?

3. "A", whatever it was. They started out speaking about monatomic hydrogen and ended up babbling about "H five A sixteen". No wonder they had fuel difficulties!

4. Sound propagation and gravitational effects on Mars. Would sound travel with the same ease it does here? We haven't read "The Atmospheres of the Planets" yet, so we don't know. But no one seemed bothered by the lessened gravity on Mars. And no one seemed bothered by the cold, especially the natives.

5. The indigenous *Homo sapiens var.* on Mars. Pehl Poch! We obscenity on their obscenity. We've been through this before. But we would like to point out that if you postulate H. saps in a very cold climate, you must also postulate either a heavy protective covering of clothes or a covering of hair. (Because, you see, the hirsute ones would have a better survival factor.) Them "Martians" had neither.

Things we did like:

1. That passionate pink color.

2. The unrelenting tenseness the picture developed and held throughout its length.

3. That crack, "I wonder what effect this double exposure would have in a convertible?" or words to that effect.

4. The background shots throughout, and especially on Mars. They did a dandy job. Did you notice the dub-in shots of the V-2 and the hydraulic mine dump?

It seems, then, that Hollywood is going to duplicate the cycle. This was a good story for circa 1934. Let's hope it doesn't take so long for 'em to evolve. We're expecting "Destination Moon" to be much better.—1204 Nogales St., Del Paso Heights, Calif.

Maybe those Martians had aluminum-lined epidermises, Coles. If they had they would hardly need to grow fur coats. Thanks to your sudden change in direction—from being targeted dead center on us—we find you in singularly mild form this time. Not to say downright bland.

We didn't see the movie in question, being warned away from it by the critics and general "quickie" atmosphere. But we did see and like *DESTINATION MOON*, all save that comic relief you object to in the other pic. When Dick Wesson as Sweeney got homesick for the Brooklyn Dodgers we felt an obscenity or two coming on ourselves. Why couldn't he at least have made it the Boston Braves or the Toledo Mudhens or the Oaks or maybe the PeeWee City Ridge Runners?

Mind you, we have no objection to comics—not even in otherwise serious movies. Our only insistence is that they be funny. And they so seldom are.

Write us again when you have more bile in your systems.

ONE-NOTE GRIPER by Stephen Howe

Dear Editor: I am breaking a precedent by writing—but heartiest congratulations on the August issue. You had three top-ranking stories. I always liked Henry Kuttner since "Mask of Circe" and his latest epic, "As You Were", only substantiates my opinion. Time stories and the various paradoxes

involved appeal to me. "New Bodies for Old" comes in second. Mind switching is not particularly new but Vence put a slightly new twist on an old theme.

Third is "A Walk in the Dark" by Clarke. The lonely feeling that everyone has felt on a dark country road was ever-present. The ending was typically Bradbury-ish. How about another novel as good as "Against the Fall of Night", Arthur?

I have only one gripe—Leinster. The characters never change in his stories, which follow the following pattern: A scientist and a beautiful girl get thrown together. Another character, who supplies the comic relief, is introduced. He invariably has a Brooklyn accent. These three people meet with an alien race trying to destroy the world. Three protagonists work furiously on an unknown gadget that finally saves little ole worthless earth.

Bradbury seems to have finished his Martian Series. I thoroughly enjoyed it, especially such fine stories as "And the Moon Be Still as Bright", "The Naming of Names", "I Mars", "The Concrete Mixer," etc.

One word to Miss Soucy: She seems too narrow-minded to read scientification.

Pardon the occasional mixup between references to S.S. and T.W.S.—240 East 79th Street, New York 21, New York.

When we made up this column we did not intentionally throw the two references to Brooklyn comics together. They grew that way. Don't worry too much about Leinster. He can turn around and surprise you delightfully at any moment. Certainly he has often enough in the past.

Somehow we have an idea Bradbury will be back on Mars fairly soon. After all, it's his home planet, his roots are there. He'll have a hard time pulling them out completely. At any rate we hope he will.

TITLE, TITLE . . .

by Bill Searles

Dear Editor: Your August issue really deserves a letter of congratulation, but I doubt that I would have stirred myself from the ennui of Florida June heat, if it hadn't been for a little slip you made in the Reader Speaks. Your attention has undoubtedly been called to it, or you must have seen it when you read the issue (or do you ever want to see the result?). It was a glaring error, juggling "There Shall Be No Darkness" & "Against the Fall of Night", which is usually an occasion for fans to run wild, sling insults and imply that the editor doesn't know or care enuf about his mag to keep up with what is going on.

But am I slinging? Heck, no! Because I find myself utterly lost in the number of stories titled with an effort to keep brightness present. Between "There Shall Be No Darkness", "Against the Fall of Night", "Lest Darkness Fall" and "The Darkness Falls", not to mention "Gather Darkness", "Night's Black Agents", "Darker Than You Think" and so on ad infinitum. (Latin that reminds me. . . .) All, especially the first three, were superior stories. In fact, ATON I consider one of the best you have ever published, but I catch myself referring to it as "Lest Darkness Fall". So, my sympathies, Mr. Editor, I know just what happened.

Oh, yes, about this special issue. Mighty good. Mighty good.

Usually it is a tragedy when you give the cover to a good story, but this time Bergey didn't botch it. Accurate—amazingly so as to character as well as plot details. The girl has some character for a change, instead of the usual screaming, dumb chorus-girl type. Some will say she looks dead pan. I consider the look more of uncaring, automatic hatred as was the crime.

I said the cover story was good. It was much more than that. Memorable is the word.

And I wish to compliment Finlay on his illo. As a fair authority on ballet, I say the dancers were beautifully done. Kuttner handled his time confusion very well. Somehow the story wasn't a classic but gave an hour of fascinating action. That cypress!

"The Weariest River" was a rehash of "Lest Darkness Fall". But this detracted from neither.

The shorts were all high quality. "Battling Bolto" could have been hacky, but wasn't. "Spacemate" had the advantage of two surprise endings—both weak alone, but effective together. "Walk in the Dark" was rather underwritten—if there is such a word. Why did you have that give-away illo? You do such a beautiful job of spoiling things with your illos.

I needn't make up any poetry—we have some all prepared. Did you notice?

"A Walk in the Dark" by Arthur C. Clarke.

What meter! What rhythm! What a mess! Reminiscent of—"The Thing in the Cellar" by David H. Keller".
Worthy of Longfellow.

Will you answer one question? Just yes or no. Is it any good hoping for anyone besides Bergey on the cover?
About the Latin verse. My second year Latin teacher will be ashamed of me, but my inadequate vocab just didn't do it. I was something about "They are able to die and return. A brief light dies with us. Night is an everlasting sleep." Inadequate, isn't it?—827 Nathan Hale Road, West Palm Beach, Florida.

All right, we pulled a pip—but as you say there was and is some cause for confusion. Not that we are ever supposed to be confused—professionally and in print at any rate—especially where two of our own stories are concerned. En passant, William-son's **DARKER THAN YOU THINK** was a grand werewolf yarn. We seem to remember giving it quite a review sendoff in one of the magazines awhile back.

Yes, there very definitely is such a word as underwriting—and outside of insurance too. It is equivalent to what is known in the theater, cinema, etc., as underplaying. To us it is just about the most effective manner of handling tension and/or drama. But it takes a highly skilled professional in either trade to handle it without burying his point completely.

As to your one-line couplets (this, we know, can't be), why not—

A note from a toad on Nathan Hale Road? which could be converted to something like this—

A couple of pearls from Will-i-am Searles.

Oh, let's forget the whole mess. As for Bergey, expect some surprises come the first of the year. We aren't talking yet but they're on the way. You and we on that Latin—pretty poor both. In fact more poor than pretty.

CONDOLENCES

by Morton D. Paley

Dear Sir: Let me offer my condolences. Within a short period of time, fans by the swarms will be hammering at your defenseless hulk, tearing you into literary fragments. When I think of the many ways in which irate letter-writers will lampoon you I shudder in agonized anticipation. And why these bombastical bombshells of vindictiveness? Because you mixed up **AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT** with **THERE SHALL BE NO DARKNESS**, that's why!

Again, I offer my condolences.

It is interesting to note the correlation between the readers' opinions of **THERE SHALL BE NO DARKNESS** and of **CARNIVAL OF MADNESS**. Both were scientific with a bearing on fantasy. Both were either mutually praised or slammed in almost all the ratings. I, for one, felt the Blish story to be excellent, and the Bradbury yarn (how these fans doth corrupt the English language!) almost as good.

Speaking of Arthur C. Clarke, we would like to ask him a question. While certainly not wishing to argue special physics with the secretary of the British Interplanetary Society, we'd like to know the reasons for his statement that a human body wouldn't explode on contact with space. With an internal pressure of 15 lbs. per square inch and no outside pressure to neutralize it, it seems to me that it would burst "at the seams".

Reversing the usual procedure of discussing stories first and letters last, I'd say that this issue's letters were more interesting than usual. The correction-happy boys were out in force, transfixing poor Blish for his errors re the Browning rifle.

Betsy Curtis' poem about "Carnival of Madness" was terrific, a welcome relief from the unrhythmical trash usually

found in the fine print section. Cox, Gibson and Zimmer, the last of a dynasty, seem the only really good letterhacks left on your pages. Joe's remark that man is a rationalizing being, but not a rational one, reminded me of the passage in **THE WORD BELOW** where the Amphibian tells the Time Traveler that his civilization seems to be made up of people who do things by picking out one of a group of alternatives and calling all the reasons possible as to the desirability of its perpetration.

It's the odor stigma of inductive vs. deductive reasoning. As to his statements concerning the individualist, we don't get the thought behind them. To our mind an individualist is one who is strongly inclined to form his own opinions (this is the way of description, not definition). Why, however, is it axiomatic that these opinions be "good"?

In other words, there are bad individualists and good individualists (this is an oversimplification), just as, again oversimplifying, there are bad and good conformists. Joe's main point, that "some . . . individualist . . . will pilot the first spaceship to the Moon" may prove untrue, as (1) the first space flight will be a government affair, not a one-man-against-the-world business a la Rene Lafayette, and (2) on the basis of this, strong-willed people aren't as suitable to any government as party yes-men.

Enough of this! Perhaps it's all a big misunderstanding. . . . The stories in this issue were somewhat disappointing, due to the fact that, up to now, each issue this year had topped the previous one's quality. However, though not as good as the June TWS, it certainly was no dud. Jack Vance's **NEW BODIES FOR OLD** was a particularly fine story, justly deserving of the fine Finlay illustrating. Vance, it appears, has finally come into his own!

Kuttner's **AS YOU WERE** was good, but might have been much better. It reads as the Mona Lisa might look, had Da Vinci done it to meet a half-hour deadline.

Wallace West can do far better than **THE WEARIEST RIVER**. This tale bore a more than superficial resemblance to **LEST DARKNESS FALL** (deCamp), and one would not think it was written by the author of **NOCTURNE**.

The shorts were universally poor. Hubbard's, especially, was sorely disappointing. Willy Ley is welcome back to your pages with his always-interesting articles.—1455 Townsend Avenue, New York 52, New York.

To date no one can say for certain what would happen to the unshielded human body in space. And we are not anxious to serve as a laboratory specimen. As for reasoning—both the inductive and the deductive processes can be right—or wrong—or can fall anywhere in between these poles.

Sorry you found the short stories disappointing.

DOWNRIGHT?

by Lin Carter

Dear Lemuel: B'gosh now, when you do put out a good ish, it's really good, isn't it? This August ish was downright terrific!

First there was the Kuttner novelet. Kuttner, the most uneven word-slinger of 'em all, turns out a small classic for one issue and a dud for the next. **AS YOU WERE** was the more classic-type. Delightful entertainment; urbane, witty, polished and clever. Style was rather like the old Thorne Smith without the sex sequences, if you can imagine such. This was Kuttner's best for you in quite a long time.

Then there was **NEW BODIES FOR OLD**, which had the cleverest plot, with the most unusual and different twist that I've read recently. There, Lemuel my dear, was a story that held your attention every sentence of the way. A story that was developed to the last inch; smoothly written, with an excellent idea behind it. Jack Vance hasn't written anything better than this that I remember reading. Swell stuff!

THE WEARIEST RIVER was an entertaining story, but so full of impossible time-paradoxes that it's mildly incredible you should print it. It shouldn't be necessary to point out that in changing the past they changed history. When they changed history, they made it unnecessary for anybody to go back in time and change the past. Therefore, nobody went back, therefore history wasn't changed, therefore they went back to change it, and so on. And again, when they went to the future, they left Mary in the past. How then, could they find a Mary in the future? This argues two identical Marys in different periods of history. Despite all this stuff, the yarn was well-written and certainly good entertainment.

The short stories, with the outstanding exception of **A WALK IN THE DARK**, were uniformly dull. The Clarke short was a fine little exercise in suspense and had a well-developed atmosphere and mood unusual in a story of this size. ACC is an author to watch, he reminds me of van Vogt.

And still our Women in Lit discussions grind on! Hot diggety!

C. Ray Byron, be informed that I do not feel inferior to the ladies, and am not basing my alleged "attacks" on their writing on an inferiority complex. Matter of fact, if you'll remember, I didn't even bring the idea up in the first place! Rex Ward did, and I mentioned I agreed with him. Mobbe Ward has an inferiority complex in regard with women, I dunno.

I have no sister, big or little. You don't have to have an overly-successful big sister or an inferiority complex in regard to dames, to see that the fact is perfectly obvious—women occupy no prominent place in literature, art, drama, sculpture or any related fields. Why, is another question. A good one too.

Marion-Astra-Zimmer-Bradley, I'm glad you agree on that point and you aren't being a traitor to your sex, merely unusually honest in your opinions and commendably un-prejudiced. It seems to be women's place, as you and others have commented, not to write literature but to inspire it. Good point, I agree with you. Think you got on the wrong track a little, however, when you remark "if it hadn't been for Helen of Troy, the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid would never have been written. Iliad yes, but what had Helen to do with the Odyssey, which related the legendary adventures of Ulysses? And what had she to do with the Aeneid of Virgil?

H. S. Weatherby, methinks Mae West is better known as an actress-comedienne, than as an author. Some mention might be made of the place women have in the theatre (for acting is certainly an art—or would it be considered a creative work, like writing a play?) Anybody have any ideas on this? Women have certainly been prominent in the theatre: Maude Adams as Peter Pan, Ethel Barrymore, Lynn Fontanne, Helen Hayes, and so forth. But would acting be considered an art?

I heard from Miss Brackett a few days ago, in regard to the title of her novelet, "Lake of The Gone Forever," which she says was from the Sanskrit classic Black Marigolds, as I guessed. She says: "Black Marigolds . . . is, to my mind, one of the greatest love-poems ever written, in Sanskrit or any other language."

As another example of how women inspire great literature, the poem was written by the poet Chauras in the hours before his execution for the crime of daring to love Vidya, the King's daughter. The love of Chauras for Vidya was immortalized in his great poem, one of the classics of Oriental literature. Where would poets be without women?

On which philosophical point I'll call this a letter.—1734 Newark St., So., St. Petersburg, Fla.

We have decided to adjourn the men-versus-women conflict for the nonce. It seems to us more time is indicated before a decision can be reached—perhaps a hundred years or three. If it hadn't been for Helen the *Iliad* would hardly have been written, true. She was the casus belli all right—and certainly a more attractive one than the ear of Seaman Jenkins, which caused a major blowup in the mid-eighteenth century that involved the American colonies along with the rest of the western world. But without the *Iliad*, no *Odyssey*—and without the *Odyssey*, no *Aeneid*—and without the *Aeneid*, no Dido, who was quite a gal on her own hook.

As for acting, it is on most levels an interpretive rather than a creative art at best. Like instrumental renditions of written music. Occasionally, of course, both rise to a creative level of sorts. But they are not as creative as the sculptor who gives shape to a lump of clay, the non-objective painter, the author of prose or verse or the composer of music. By the nature of their work they simply cannot be.

FOOEY!

by Tom Covington

Dear Ed.: Fooey! I think I've got him cornered and am

getting a sort of egotistical satisfaction out of having guessed the end of his story when he springs this on me! I'm talking about Walt Sheldon's wonderful short story in the August issue of your mag. I knew from the very first that Myra, the nurse, was really a Sirian and was sort of amazed that Sheldon (you don't have to answer this one, but is he (Walt Sheldon) Seldon Walters? could really expect the readers not to figure out his story. By the time I came to the ending I was all hepped up with a nasty anticipation of having put something over on an author—then my lovely dream was shattered! Backwith was a Sirian too! 'Tis no use. I'll just quit trying to guess the ends of stories. . . . I can't win.

This neat little fooler by Sheldon topped off what I consider the best issue of all recent ones.

Frankly, every time I hear of Kuttner (or one of his eleven pen names) being the byline on a long novel, I expect a lost race story of great boredom. That's what I expected when I picked up the August issue and started reading "As You Were." But I was pleasantly surprised. It was a time travel story of great boredom. Oh, just a slip—I think it was fairly good.

But, when compared to Jack Vance's "New Bodies for Old," "As You Were" is mediocre. The former is really a classic. Or is it just because I love brain-transference stories that my opinion of it is so high? I think it could have been developed better by a little more play upon Mario's emotions and blunders when he finds himself in Ebery's body. Vance might even have injected a little humor into the thing in that manner. Oh well, I guess nothing can be perfect.

The biggest fault of "The Weariest River" seems to be that West dammed it up in a few places. I mean that the action, the progressive thread of the story, bogged down. If the action could have been less erratic than "The Weariest River" would have been a good story.

The shorts in this issue, except for Sheldon's piece, were just average. "A Walk In The Dark" had a lot of suspense but that's all, and "Battling Bolto" seemed disconnected. I find it hard to believe that Hubbard wrote the latter story.

I'm not a fanzine editor yet, but I do sympathize with the poor beings. "The Frying Pan" includes a clue to its contents in the title—pan. You may be justified in saying some of the things you do though. I don't care just as long as you don't criticize the zines I write for.—315 Dawson Street, Wilmington, North Carolina.

Just give us a list of those 'zines to which you contribute, Tom, and we'll do our best not to leave you out of the flop parade. We can usually find something if we hunt hard enough—even in Shakespeare and G.B.S. Why should you be an exception?

We haven't the slightest idea as to whether or not Walt Sheldon is one Seldon (Sheldon?) Walters, but it seems reasonably probable. You might write him, care of the magazine, to find out.

JOLTED

by Mary M. Hesler

Dear Sir: Reading the letters from fans, published in your August issue, I found myself jolted out of my habitual silence. I normally derive a great deal of amusement from the fan section of your magazine, but this month I felt I should "protect" the name of Ray Bradbury.

Some inane creature by the name of Joe Gibson, blasts Bradbury with literally all he has—which isn't very much I'm afraid. He accuses Bradbury of "pinching." "Well, who doesn't pinch from other writers? There's practically nothing new under the sun. It can be overdone, of course, but Bradbury is definitely not guilty in that respect."

Personally, I consider Ray Bradbury one of the best in his field, and I am very critical. I enjoy him most of all the pulpsters, I enjoy him in the slicks too. Incidentally, his "Illustrated Man" in the July Esquire is really excellent.

Bradbury, if you should see this, I hope you will be sufficiently grateful!

By the way, the letter from Helen Soucy was rather the bottom and end of everything—don't you think?—265 Killaly Street West, Humberstone, Ontario, Canada.

Personally we have a most questionable semantic tendency to think of "bottom" and "end" as one and the same thing, Mary. Thanks for rising to Ray's defense—not that he needs it but it is always heartening. The lad can write like a dream.

WHEN TO GO? by Stan Woolston

Dear Editor: A discussion has been going on in the ranks of the Outlanders concerning a locale to go to in time if something (and we were thinking of the A-Bomb) made this now undesirable, I seem to remember giving some sort of glib answer like "Rome before the Dark Ages"—or some such locale—with the idea of making a place for myself by changing the habits of the inhabitants.

Reading Wallace West's **THE WEARIEST RIVER** reminded me of our discussions; it seemed to be a version where the ultimate in "monkeying" is possible. If I were to grade the stories, I think that this story would be at the top for the issue.

West also reminded me that most places in the past that had come to mind as possible atom bomb hideaways were stinking places. Soap is probably one of the inventions that modern folks think the least of, unless they read of the squalor of even the wealthiest in years gone by, or perhaps hear radio accounts of Europeans who are said to have turned spy for the sake of a ration of the stuff. In the United States we use soap—in some parts of the world they dream of it.

I had supposed that a Kuttner story would almost automatically rate among the first few stories in a magazine, but I was disappointed in **AS YOU WERE**. The opening reminded me of an Oona and Jick story jabberwocky. The repeated side-remarks to the reader made the yarn even less comprehensible than it would have been otherwise. I will record this (for myself) as his bad story of the year. If he gets by the rest of the 1950 season with none as bad, I will still rate him as a top-notch author.

There was very little in the whole August issue to inspire that "Thrilling" at the front of the name. I say this in a relative way; usually I've only an occasional short story to shake my head over. This time my head lost a good many of those hirsute decorations that get brittle with age and break.

This despite my enjoyment of the "Two Other Complete Novels," which I liked moderately well.

For several years I've been very pleased with the short story selection in TWS. This time both Hubbard and Clarke weren't good enough to inspire me to gleeful gaiety. And despite my sore throat the last few days I believe I'd happily laugh if the sentences were properly arranged. (I'm inclined to be gay when one of the characters does something that seems eminently fitting; this is true whether the scene is meant to be serious or humorous.)

I evade telling myself that I have any sadistical leanings by saying that they are merely "make-believe," yet when they don't have a feeling of being real, or ridiculousness, or some other kind of consistency, I'm inclined to grind my teeth. I wonder if this is the way an editor acts when he gets well into a promising manuscript and finds it's getting impossible.)

Despite the uninspiring feel of the "open letter" session in **THE FRYING PAN**, I usually read this about the first thing, with the letters first. Your editorial opening for the **READER SPEAKS** has been very good in past issues. In Santa Ana (county seat of Orange County, next door to Los Angeles) I went into an Army-sponsored exhibit of a "flying saucer," which turned out to be a model airship with inclined planes around the cabin. The uniformed man told us who dropped in that the model moves close to a hundred miles an hour. The insinuation that they had the model's bigger sister was there.

That special feature article by Willy Ley was excellent. I wonder if he has data on what points a round-the-world craft launched from Russia could hit in the USA, and also the opposite, what targets would be possible for us.

I like your reviews. They include a wide and varied bunch of publishers, and the data given is complete enough to help a guy make up his mind on which to procure. Thank you.

This is overlong, so adios. May all your troubles turn out to be bubbles—of the Finlay kind.—12832 S. West St., Garden Grove, Calif.

Most interesting item in your letter was that anent the Saucer exhibit. Hope you're right about the insinuations, etc.—not only for the sake of our recent editorial but for all of us generally. Sorry you found the issue dull. But the old saw about "some of the people all of the time" and vice versa certainly applies to the editing of a magazine, if the letters received are any criterion. No story, however good, has ever pleased all its readers.

SECTION MANAGER by Shelby Vick

Dear Samson—To mufon in any form I have but one comment—BAAAA! If you don't like a continual switching of names, however, I shall stick to this one. Somehow, "Samson" seems to be just right—and that's a joke, junior.

Now, I—even I!—have a Method. Everyone else seems to come up with one sooner or later. Here's mine:

AS YOU WERE—cJc
THE WEARIEST RIVER—bKb
NEW BODIES FOR OLD—bKc
SPACEMATE—bGa
BATTILING BOLTO—dLc
A WALK IN THE DARK—dLd

Huh? You want it explained? Well—it might clear things up. The first letter represents the start of the story. The grades range from a to e, c being average. The middle letter is the body of the story, ranging A to Z, M being a little—tho not much—above average, N just a bit below. The last letter is arrived at exactly the same way as the first—a to e.

I rated them in preference, tho you might note that **SPACEMATE**, third from the last, received a higher grade than any of the others. That's because it was the top of its class in the short story field. Tho the pic had spoiled the surprise, then found that it had just pointed it up! Sheldon made up for the April issue. **THE ROUND THE WORLD BOMBER** didn't fit in anywhere—but it was good, and morbidly fascinating.

Now, Samson—you did it! Yes, you! You mentioned **THE WORDS!** "Flying Saucers." In clear, black print, I saw it. I'm not going to argue with you. Like yourself, I've never seen one. But I'd like to say this: They have proven one thing—human beings haven't advanced since before the days of Columbus, not as a whole.

Back then, too many didn't believe that there was any other land on Earth. Too many said that their part of the planet was the center of everything, that there was nothing else. And now—now that they have seen too clearly that there is life all over the world—the ancestors of those people say self-confidently, with the same stupidity, "Well, we've seen it all. This is the end. Outside of Earth, there is no life. We are a rare, unique thing—the only intelligent life in the Universe!"

Intelligent? Pardon me while I choke . . . Even the editors of **Time Magazine** came out with frank disbelief that there was any possibility of anyone outside of Earth being clever enough to leave their planet. Their attitude seemed to be that "Since we can't do it, NATURALLY no other beings could have." And now you, you old son of a Sam you, say you don't think they're extraterrestrial! Could be you're right.

And now the letters . . . For a goodly part, about werewolves and (now how could this have happened?) aspersions towards mutton and queries towards your identity. And then we have Lin Carter. And you quote as a good novel by a femme, Willa Cather's **DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCH-BISHOP**. Oh, no! As a guy what has had over two years too-intimate contact with a library and the ponderous tomes therein, it seems to me you could have dug up (and I mean dug!) something better than that. Incidentally, I agree with Link.

And 'little' you referred to me. Just a moment, while I draw up my full six feet. (As pal McCain once quipped, it keeps me broke just buying shoes.)

In your heading for Betsy Curties' letter, there is something I've been trying to fathom: By 'verse' did you mean 'first' or 'worst'? I don't like blank verse, personally.

Comment re Wallace West's story: I'm glad, for a change, to go back in time and read about Romans who didn't speak with a Brooklyn accent. But if Bill and his group destroyed the original time-track, then they were never born, thus couldn't have been there to do any destruction. How do you talk your way out of that, hmmm—Box 493, Lynn Haven, Florida.

Answering your queries in reverse, Shelby—you've nailed down the gap in all such time-paradoxes that Samuel Mines handled so neatly in his **FIND THE SCULPTOR** some years back. But for this we are to do without time-travel tales? Shame, for shame, Shelby!

We weren't fooling around when we headed la Curtis' poem "The Verse One." She is one who wrote and writes good verse—thassal.

We still like **DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP**.

When you talk of "ancestors" of those

who scoffed at Columbus, are you sure you don't mean descendants? If not you're sadly involved in a time paradox yourself.

As for your rating system, you're idea of slicing stories into segments, like insects on a laboratory slide, seems revolting. Outside of the letter-combinations possible, that is. We especially liked the onomatopoeic effects of bGa for SPACEMATE and dLd for a WALK IN THE DARK. Perhaps you could work out a system that would go bblidy-bblidy or even gah!

AFFEERD? AND WHY NOT?

by Rick Dikeman

Dear Editor: It just occurred to this scribe that you're one of the few editors in the pulp field who still cling persistently to their anonymity. Surely, you're not afeerd of revealing thy name. But your motives are best known to thyself, and are not mine to question. (Knowing the editor's name does lend a certain air of intimacy to a letter column).

Commenting on the stories in short order: Best in the issue from a standpoint of sheer enjoyment was Vance's "New Bodies . . ." A really fine example of a variation on an old theme; and for sheer descriptive excellence this Vance is near-tops. Speaking of seeing things in terms of color, Jack Vance must indeed do this. His stuff overflows with color-names.

For suspense Arthur Clarke's short rates high. What with a thin plot and only one scene, one character, he has done remarkably well in sustaining and intensifying interest. The ending was inevitable, if an anticlimax was to be avoided, but nevertheless contained a certain degree of shock. A nice job all the way through.

Kuttner's satire was well-done, if slightly overdone. He can do better. But the entertainment value, as in all his work, was there.

Walt Sheldon seems to be coming along. A good workmanlike author. A little stiff in the prose department, but easy prose isn't easily come by (I should know).

L. Ron Hubbard's short read like he had turned it out at white-hot speed over a pack of cigs and a pot of coffee in about three-quarters of an hour. This is a good example of the type of story that has earned in the past for science fiction such a poor reputation with the literary long-hairs, not to mention the lay public. The absence of same, along with toned-down covers, would do a lot to elevate sf to a position at least on a par with crime fiction and perhaps higher.

Ye Ed's editorial on the notorious saucer bugaboo was mild, safe and if not particularly thought-provoking, at least entertaining. At least you didn't claim to have an inside track on the info, like a certain other editor who shouldn't be a mystery to anybody. And I like your style.

What happened to MacDonald and Bradbury? The absence of either of these two authors on any magazine title page is always conspicuous. Bradbury has moved on to greener slick pastures if past performances indicate coming trends. He will be missed, but some younger author will take his place. And of late he seemed to be running dry on ideas.

His contention that he can cover up a weak story line with his highly original though self-conscious style is one that I seriously question. In my opinion style is only a small portion of good writing. Style alone is always hollow and pretentious. And a style like Brad's, though worthy, can become quite cloying. Especially when he insists on filling it out with a deadening repetition of ideas.

Although he has had a great deal of success both in the popular and the literary field, mainly because of that spectacular style and the early originality of his plots, he has never shown a certain maturity which under-played writing generally manages to exhibit.

But I didn't intend to go off onto a long, admittedly pedantic, dissertation on Master Ray, which could interest only those readers who have become familiar enough with his work to know what I'm talking about.

With a suggestion for another novel by Fred (Fabulous Clip-joint) Brown and a new Kuttner opus in the grand style and tradition of "The Mask of Circe," I will sign off and let some other hack take over.—Church Street, Brooktondale, New York.

No, we aren't afraid to reveal our identity—quite the reverse, although in the case of a letter like yours, Rick, we are inclined to crawl in somewhere and hide. You certainly

don't pull your punches. Our anonymity, as we have repeatedly explained, is purely a matter of policy.

As for MacDonald and Bradbury—J.D. had the lead short novel in the October TWS and is working on a novel for SS. Ray has promised us stuff late in the year. And in spite of your somewhat scurrilous opinion of his work, we sincerely hope and pray that it will turn up. He is the class of the field, whether or not you approve of his methods and ideas. Brown has been doing only short stf stuff of late—alack—and putting in his heavy swotting on his mysteries and straight novels. H. Kuttner is in somewhat the same boat. Well, tempus fugit.

WHAT'S ALL THIS?

by J. T. Oliver

Dear Editor: Since you insist on printing letters I will proceed to write you some. The fact that only Bob Farnham jumped on me about my proposal to cut the letter section seems to prove my point. Only Bob Farnham reads the letters! All the fans I know read the answers and thereby figure out what the letter was all about. Why not print a whole section of answers and forget the letters? When I want to read fan letters I write a fan. It's that simple.

This issue of TWS was darn good. All three of the novelets were top grade. Is Kuttner working for the movies now? His recent work seems to indicate something of the sort. Jack Vance's story was kinda off-trail, and all the better for it. Walt Sheldon is going great now. How is it that guys like him, Kris Neville, and Mack Reynolds go along for years and never sell a story, then, when they make their first sale, start selling everywhere? Do they suddenly learn how to write, or what?

Blish's werewolf story seems to have upset some of your fans. Don't know why: it was very good. But some people don't consider a story sf unless it happens on Mars in the year 2500.

This MacDonald is becoming a real writer, and at the same time, a menace. If somebody doesn't stop him he'll take over the whole field.

Incidentally, STARTLING hasn't come out here. How come? It always sells good in Columbus. We don't write you insulting letters. We don't tell people your name really is Mutton. Now what have you got against us? I wrote Carlson to send me a copy, so maybe I won't miss the Hamilton story, which I'm told is a classic.

I like your articles. They aren't too darn technical. My science is limited to the hi-school variety, and I don't remember a whole lot of that!—712 32nd Street, Columbus, Georgia.

Again responding in reverse—we spent most of our school years in a mad effort to avoid science courses—which is why you'll get more fiction than science out of us. Sorry about the no SS—hope conditions have improved.

As for writers like Sheldon, Reynolds, etc., you are wrong. Both of them have been selling fiction for years in other fields. They have only recently switched over to stf.

Sheldon, especially, has done fine sports and air-war stuff. Was an AAF pilot in the recent embroglio.

You've got an idea there for reading the letter columns. But if it becomes general don't put it past us to cook up a fiendish gimmick or two just by way of fouling up the works with a hotfoot.

XENO YET! by Vernon L. McCain

Dear Sargeant Saturn: How are ye, matey? Open up the hatches and let a space-tuckered wanderer soak his weary bones in this luscious xeno impregnated air. I see frog-eyes and wart-ears are on deck but where's m' old pal, snaggle-tooth? Oh, gone to the dentist, huh? Well, I can understand it.

Open up a fresh barrel of xeno. You'll need it because my throat is dry and it will be dryer before we finish dissecting your Summer issue. Incidentally, Sarge, it's more than four years since the war ended in January, 1946. Surely the paper shortage still can't be that bad. Come on, have mercy on us poor earthlings and please, please, please go bi-monthly! Now to the Summer issue. The cover wasn't bad, for Bergy. He even covered the gal's shoulders! Congratulations. It was a pretty good issue as stories go.

Story ratings as follows: Novels—"New Bodies For Old"— $9\frac{1}{2}$ jugs of xeno. Vance can get nicely piliated on that and perhaps forget Magnus Ridolph entirely: "As You Were"—6 jugs of xeno. Kuttner can do better than this, but he has done worse, too.

Shorts—"A Walk In The Dark"—5 jugs of xeno, poor plot nicely handled. "Spacemate"—5 jugs of xeno. Rather hackneyed. Sheldon would have had a much better story if he'd pulled a surprise ending, made the man turn out to be the alien, instead of the woman; see what I mean?

"The Weariest River"— $1\frac{1}{2}$ jugs of xeno. This was a pretty weary rewrite of an old idea. Far too similar to DeCamp's classic "Lest Darkness Fall" for comfort. Why does every time-meddler have to return to Rome. Why not send 'em back to some other historical crisis for a change. Besides I'm rather tired of probability worlds stories. The whole idea of probability worlds is obviously ridiculous. "The Weariest River" wasn't too bad a short, but I hate to think what we would have had to struggle through if you had let West expand it to a novel. That would have been really awful! I won't even contemplate how bad a novel it would have made.

That covers the stories and there still seems to be enough xeno to go around to the letter-writers. (Slurp—after all, I'm a letter-writer too, you know!)

Glad to see Joe Kennedy back in TRS for the first time in many an ish, even if it was a one-shot appearance. He proved he's still king of the letter-hacks. Also nice to see the two current top letterhacks, Lin Carter and Ed Cox, in your pages plus Zimmer-Bradley. And give Shelvick, as you so aptly dubbed him, one jug of xeno for deserting his archiegrams. Best letter in a long time, Shelby.

How many STF fans perused the recently released government report telling of the 'Manhattan Project' attempt during the war to build an atomic bomb and the failure thereof? Practically all fans, I suppose, and certainly all editors. I suppose stories about atomic fission will be taboo in sf for the next ten years as a result, more's the pity.

But the government is wrong—and I think I can prove it. I have experimental data that practically proves definitely that atomic fission is possible. If I just had the money behind me the government has perhaps I could really present proof. Anybody can get the complete facts by writing me. Also, anyone wishing to join the Vanport, Oregon, Science Fiction Society, please contact me for full particulars.

One last thought: Lin Carter listed the four top femme writers in his letter; Moore, Hull, St. Clair, and Brackett. Then to point out their small stature he says 'Brackett is not a van Vogt'. Lin, may I point out that while Brackett is not a van Vogt, Hull most certainly is. And, for that matter, Brackett is a Hamilton, for what it's worth. OK, OK, I realize that's pretty bad. I'll leave now, Sarge, old boy. I'm getting pretty xenocated anyway.—R.F.D. No. 3, Nampa, Idaho.

Yes, and as we have already pointed out in our introductory editorial, C. L. Moore is a Kuttner—certainly.

Should the above missive prove confusing to Johnny-come-lately readers, let us state now that it is absolutely typical of the letters received when we inherited this department and the late unlamented Sergeant Saturn held absolute sway. A pretty funny spoof, wot?

WE, THE NON-HUMAN by Eugene DeWeese

Dear Thing (With a name like Lemuel Mutton, you can't be human): As you can see this is to TWS, but before I get started on such, there's a word left over for the July SS. I was looking back over Hamilton's novel and came across a

little item that stated, "But some were not much changed. Still the Great Bear . . . Lyre held true . . . etc." Now that tale was supposed to be at least a million years in the future.

So how could any constellations still be in any way familiar when the Great Bear will be next to unrecognizable within 50,000 years? And if most stars move about one degree every 100,000 years, and much less in many cases, there could hardly be any recognizable constellations. OK, prosecution rests.

Now for TWS. Why hasn't Kuttner done something like AS YOU WERE before? And let's hope he does something more like it in the near future. The whole thing of his dodging back in time and continually readjusting something reminded me of my attempt at erecting and making perfectly level a tripod on a bed of gravel. Get one edge level and it would be way off the other way; get that other way straightened out, and the first would be all loused up. But that poor, abused cypress tree . . . If it hadn't been for said cypress tree and the comedy involved, I'd have said it was a vV time paradox tale. But, I guess it wasn't anywhere as complicated as THE TIME AXIS—which was really van Vogtish.

Ah, well, to pass on to the next tale that would have been undoubtedly called a novel a couple years ago. How come no Magnus Ridolph? But if Vance can do that well without him, I hope he never comes back. Although the general plot wasn't, the writing and characterizations were well worthy of the sickliness.

THE WEARIEST RIVER. Hmmm. . . . Another mess of time travel paradoxes. If they fixed things up back there in Rome so they were never born (and I presume they weren't since they weren't in evidence) or at least weren't associated with Professor Gordon, and so the prof never experienced in time travel, how could they have gone back to Rome in the first place? Or is that other alternate time track still supposed to exist? Or could they be . . . Oh, nuts, never mind. Pretty good, tho.

BATTLING BOLTO: Phooey! And especially so since it was the usually above average Hubbard. SPACEMATE: Good for Sheldon who usually turns out next to nothing worth reading. Nice ending. A WALK IN THE DARK: Best of the shorts, but not so hot for a writer like Clarke. The plot was terribly old, but the writing was the one redeeming factor—though it would have been better, had more real horror atmosphere (It was supposed to be basically a horror story?) if it had been written by the late H. P. Lovecraft, the greatest fantasy and horror writer since Poe. That last appositive may start an argument somewhere, but I still think he was the best and as yet no one has surpassed him.

Now for a brief commentary on the illos. Finlay is the best artist in any of the sfantasy mags—if he would just leave out all those #(&%)& little white bubbles or whatever they're supposed to be. I guess the ones on 49 were supposed to be there, but certainly not those on 46-7. Why don't he settle down and do some straight pictures without all that fantasy trimmings? Cover I suppose is Bergy though I can find no signature. Must be as no one else can turn out such paint blobs. That's all except, Hooray for Orban and are you finally done with Astarita? Sure hope so.—Rochester, Indiana.

To go back to a moderately hoary Cole Porter ditty—this couplet is from his

*Imagine Me Without You—
Imagine Staten Island without a ferry
Imagine little George Washington without a Cherry. . . .*

Let us paraphrase it with—
*Imagine your poor dentist without an inlay
Imagine bubble bathing without a Finlay. . . .*

Anyway, that's the idea. The bubble bath technique is Virgil the great. Without it—as his work sometimes appears—it simply isn't the same.

Re Henry the Kuttner, though some of you good folk do not seem to be aware of the fact, HK has one of the finest flairs for humor in stf. It goes a long way back beyond the Hogbens too. His BETTER THAN ONE in the Spring, 1943, issue of CAPTAIN FUTURE is still to us the funniest

science fiction story we have ever read. And how about BABY FACE, TOO MANY COOKS and PERCY THE PIRATE, to mention just a few. Verily our Henry is a many-sided something.

KERNELS IN THE CORN by Anna Lee McLeod

Dear Lammuel Mutton: Whatever anyone says, please do not do away with the letter columns in either of your two publications. I am very much pleased to find that there are other educated and yet erudition-hungry people around, also that there are those who are not afraid to give out kernels of knowledge. From these letters I receive some of the same feeling I had while attending the University of California (for whose environs I long).

Just lately I found out that you had both SS and TWS and as I have not read all the stories in TWS of Aug. (despite an aching back from sitting reading so long) I won't comment on them. THE READER SPEAKS. I thought very good; a logical explanation of the Flying Saucers. Now I hope Wayne Springoff is satisfied.

Yes, of course I have read "Letters From Our Readers." Not being in the know-how on the controversy about men and women in the literary field, I can say nothing. But giving a man a home-feeling, keeping his clothes washed and mended, his meals cooked (on time some of the time) and having children (which also make for the home-feeling) is (or are, as the case may be) a lot in itself to inspire said Homosapien to great and noble deeds. Granted, women???

Huh-unh, McCain, I disagree with the idea that Mrs. Bradley will lose her charm or spice because she is married. Great guns!!! Where would all the world be if the clever and intellectual women remained old maids? Give the future generations a chance to have the guidance of quick-witted parents. What do you want to happen, your great-great-grand-children to be carried off by some monsters from Mars because they did not have wits enough to defend themselves??

Enough of that. Perhaps I should mention my daughter, now nine-months-old, as explanation for the above statements. So "Snooksey" sleeps as I write and I let the housework go all day just to read science-fiction. Awful??? Well, I haven't been to a movie for about a month and sft takes the place of that recreation very nicely.—Apt. 2—213 South Union Avenue, Havre-de-Grace, Maryland.

We agree—oh, we agree, Mrs. McLeod, except to query wistfully how any nine-month-old so appallingly termed "Snooksey" could possibly have a parent in the offspring who is "witted" at all. Yipe! Otherwise, a swell letter and please let's have a repeat performance after you have read the stories sometime.

WE HOPE HE'S RIGHT by D. V. Hassett

Dear Sir: This being the first letter that I have written to your Mag. or any other one, I am glad that it can be one of praise.

"The Weariest River" by Wallace West in your August issue is one of the finest stories of this type that I have ever read. In my opinion Mr. West has given us a fresh, unusual and quite logical adventure into the realm of SF.

I have no doubt that some of your readers will disagree with me, but that is to be expected. To mis-quote Lincoln, "You can please all of the fans some of the time, and some of the fans all of the time, but you can't please all of them all of the time." I do believe however that with the well rounded contents of TWS you have a formula that will please most of the fans most of the time.

I'll write again when I find another story that's above the average of the good stories that you usually print. And I hope that's soon!!—227 Roosevelt Street, Providence 9, Rhode Island.

So do we, so do we, Herr Hassett. And since we have already misquoted the same source you use in this department, let us also add that Barnum was right when he said, "There's a sucker born every minute—and two to take him."

Seems to us Tex Guinan should get into that act somewhere. And for the record we do not consider you suckers, you lucky, lucky people, you.

WHO'S EXCITED? by Richard R. Smith

Dear Editors—Why all the mass insanity in TRS in the Aug. TWS? Why people get so excited is beyond me.

First, let me say that when I "started shooting holes in the science of 'THIRTY SECONDS—THIRTY DAYS'" I was not trying to prove that Mr. Clarke was wrong or that I was brainy or alert or anything else. I read stories for the plots, the characters, the background and the spatterings of science to help me in my own stories. I don't give a d—n about the science.

Also, let me say that when it comes to science, I know strictly from nothing. If Mr. Clarke wishes to insist that a body near Venus would be a temperature of 130 degrees F, he can insist. On the other hand, Mr. Clarke's, "We're tougher than that!" won't keep me from believing that a human body would explode in space. With a near-absolute vacuum on the outside of the human body, I cannot picture it doing otherwise.

Mr. Clarke can keep his belief and I'll keep mine until I believe otherwise. Why Mr. Clarke got so upset—as I said before—is beyond me. The story itself is one of the best I've ever read.

And now to Mr. (?) Bryan with his Rimsky-Korsakov. Mr. Bryan, someone should learn you manners. It is not polite to call material in a fellow fan's letter tripe. Offhand I can't remember anyone else doing it. I have never done it. Even though I thought your letter was tripe, I wouldn't say it. I didn't ask you to take my word for it that space was hot enough to melt steel. And I didn't ask you to believe that space itself has a measurable temperature. Why don't you go back to your Scheherazade music and find a better mood?

AS YOU WERE is one of Kuttner's best stories which is saying a lot. It is certainly the funniest sft story I've ever read. On page 34, lower right-hand column, I quote, "...as if the oatmeal had cursed him." I couldn't help thinking that I wouldn't blame the oatmeal if it did curse Stumm. The oatmeal really took a beating. Stumm threw it once, spilled it twice, ate it around eight times and even ate it backwards once (or should I say unate?).

NEW BODIES FOR OLD was great. Jack Vance makes out better in the longer stuff than he does in the Ridolph short stories. THE SUB-STANDARD SARDINES (novelet) was liked by everyone although his short stories right then had been disliked. All the other Vance novelets I can remember were good also. THE WORLD-THINKER and FATE OF THE ... something or other. THE WEARIEST RIVER by West was fair.

BATTLING BOLTO was great. Usually, I don't like Hubbard's material because it lacks color or something but this short was perfect. SPACEMATE had the perfect twist in the ending and A WALK IN THE DARK likewise.

I suppose that's all for this trip. Thank goodness I didn't punch holes in any author's science this time!—4 East 44th Street, Wilmington, Delaware.

To date we have received no word that Arthur Clarke has exploded in mid-space. On which fact he probably based his premise (now ye Edde is asking for it—but he'll take Clarke in any form, even vituperative, and like it.)

Your oatmeal sequence reminds us again of the Boston legend about Old Man Cabot, whose sixty-year morning routine was shattered one morning at Nahant when the cook burned the oatmeal he always had eaten at that hour. She reported the disaster to Mrs. Cabot, who timidly intruded upon her husband's reading of the *Herald* and informed him there would be no oatmeal that morning.

He regarded her thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "Well, I never did like it much anyway." After sixty years!

If we have told it before in these columns we don't care—it kills us.

HEART-WARMING by Bob Farnham

Dear Lem: An S.O.S. to various fan friends and the response was heart-warming! I have been thus enabled to keep up with our Mags and with Fandom via the letter columns. Fantastic Story Quarterly—with The Exile of the Skies by Vaughan, took first place over all the stories in this and the previous issue. I certainly hope we have more by Vaughan! Can do, Lem???

The Last Planet was good and I enjoyed it but "The Light Bender" had too morbid an ending. It left me with a feeling akin to sadness, and I've had too much of that stuff lately, as it is. Thumbs Down on "The Light Bender!"

TWS for August was especially good. It had my letter in it, and I frankly admit to getting a kick out of seeing my letters printed! Ego Boo? Wal-I . . . mebbe, "As You Were"—Kuttner was great! I wonder how many of us are, like Peter Owen, frantic for a "tomorrow" worth living? Even our "today" is not what it might be. The Fates treat us a bit rough, now and then.

"New Bodies For Old"—Vance was interesting and readable but again—a Fantasy in a supposedly-Sci-fi magazine! GAHHHHH—I It was good, tho. I want to ask your permission to ask thru our columns that all Fans South of the Mason-Dixie Line contact me by mail. I have something of interest and I am NOT selling books!

So Brother C. Ray Bryan is against the return of Sgt. Saturn! well! tsk . . . tsk! . . . hoodathunkit! I tho't he liked the guy!

Helen Soucy says that "There Shall Be No Darkness" is trash! Baloney! It was one of the best tales I have read since I started reading SF and Fantasy in 1925. And where does she get off calling Ray Bradbury's "Carnival Of Madness" a Poor Story? I'd like to know upon what basis she judged it! Maybe she belongs to the WCTU and is mentally-soured on Man! I haven't seen anything—and that goes for anything in print—by a Female writer that can compare with the lowliest of Bradbury's work.

BAHHHloneyl!
Sens is KEERECT!

I cut her letter out and chopped it up fine. The corn has come up three inches since I scattered that letter on the ground! (maybe this crack won't fit . . . but that's the way she made me feel!)

The August TWS was tops as usual. Thanks for another grand issue!—104 Mountain View Drive, Dalton, Georgia.

Okay, Bob. It warms our narsty little heart to hear that fandom is keeping you au courant. Wish we could do more ourselves. Don't let the Bradbury-scoffers perturb you unduly. Their existence is one of the surest marks of his head-shoulders-and-torso emergence above the rest of the field. Please keep in touch with us whenever possible and get over that exiled feeling.

OCULOMACERATING—WHADDAT? by Michael Wigodsky

Dear Lem: After an absence of Ghu-and-you know how long (I don't), I return (maybe) to the open and oculomac-erating pages of TRS of TWS. Even if it means leaving out some letters (even mine), couldn't you print the remainder in something a little easier on the ordinary, non-microscopic retina?

But to continue: this issue of your favorite magazine (maybe (not mine) is no worst than most and a little better than some. I have no interest in rating story quality to the twenty-ninth decimal place (see R. Saunders' letter), for I have never met any pinpoint angles.

If I had any sense, I would comment on the letter column and ignore the fiction, which in any case is not written by fans. But I have no sense, so:

1. "A Walk in the Dark" by Arthur C. Clarke. Doubtless anyone who has ever been in any particular danger would not care for this. It takes "one rankly warm insider," as Frost called an Eskimo, to enjoy this type. An almost flawless horror story, technically (but not in any other sense), not too far below Cozens' "Castaway."

2. "As You Were" by Henry Kuttner. This might have gone lower (the time was more confusing than anything I've read since Dunne's second book (the name I can't remember) but it was saved by the Komic Klashes and one-half of a paragraph: "Face to face, he and the blue enamel clock turned blank stares upon one another. 'Dream?' murmured Owen distractedly. 'Dream? Then I am a fish?'"

I might wish Owen the owner of some extranormal resemblance to the "hero" of "Rain in the Doorway."

3. "New Bodies for Old" by Jack Vance. Hardly an original plot and this treatment is rather melodramatic but Ebery, who never appears in the story, became so real and dislikable to me that this almost nosed out Kuttner.

4. "Spacemate" by Walt Sheldon. Aside from that Jim doesn't think like "rians or whatever they were, good. A dirty-trick ending a 'Ackroyd,' though.

5. "The Weariest River" by Wallace West. Now I really go to town. First, a highly cerebrotic protest: We know little enough of the actions of these men, and less of their characters; and I doubt that Sheldon himself could somatize persons from doubtless inaccurate statues or, worse, mere portrait busts. The professor's time-travel theory is sillier than most, and his contributions, aside from the encyclopedia and the gold (how did Hugh carry so much?), probably too peripheral to do much good.

I didn't expect another "Lest Darkness Fall" anyway. Just one more denigration: Toynbee holds, in contradiction to Gibbon, that an empire cannot decline and fall because it is one of the early symptoms of the decay of a society. The Roman Empire was nearing its peak as an empire in Caesar's. Ergo, fill it in for yourself.

6. "Battling Bolto" by L. Ron Hubbard. I hate to rate Hubbard last, as is so often necessary, because of the high quality of his best work. But the rest is so poor that the last-place rating for Hubbard is becoming automatic, except when G. O. Smith, E. E. Smith or Ray Cummings is in the same issue.

On to the letter column:

I noticed numerous comments on "Nocturne" which seemed all to ignore an assumption apparently implicit in its development: That all music must develop in the way in which Western music has developed and that other forms are simply more primitive stages on the same development. West also ignored many recent developments in Western music, substituting for them imaginary developments of his own (and, incidentally, giving the word homophony an absurd new definition.)

With a request for a time-travel tale set in Medieval England (parallel worlds, of course), especially when "All, all, was Bolingbroke's" I leave you (Falstaff and an industrial society would make beautiful incongruities together, hein?)—402 W. Clay. Houston 6, Texas.

You may have been absent for awhile, Michael, but you certainly are back aglow with vitriol. What were you doing while you were away—honing up on a group of Charles Addams characters?

You might have something in your final suggestion. In another existence—as sports editor—we not long ago ran across an anecdote of the one time anyone ever succeeded in shutting up the late Wilbur Robinson, for years the rotund, genial and ingenious manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers (or Robins as they were then called.)

One hot day in St. Louis someone called what he considered a very raw decision against Zack Wheat or Dazzy Vance or some other Brooklyn star. Old Robby, all 300 pounds of him, was sufficiently outraged to come heaving up out of the visitors' dug-out like some stranded sea-elephant on a rampage.

Whereat a fan directly behind the bench, taking his cue from a beer advertisement painted on the left-field fence, shouted, "Siddown, Falstaff!" astonishing Robbie so greatly that he actually obeyed.

"Whoinell's this Falstaff?" he wanted to know. "Never heard of him."

Old Sir John himself would probably have enjoyed that one.

OMEGA by James Zwirner

Dear Mr. Mutton: After innumerable deferred promises to

write you, I finally find myself Before my Royal and rar'fa' to go.

You poor dog!

But to the business before us, TWS, August, 1950, Volume Thirty-four, Number Three.

In the story department, Wallace West walks off with first place with his "Weariest River." Perhaps this is so because I have a weakness for "It might have been IF . . ." stories, stories like "Sidewise in Time," "Wheels of If," "Worlds of If," "It Micht Ha' Been," etc. Anyway convey my congratulations to Mr. West for a very well thought-out and well-written story.

Second place goes to Jack Vance's yarn. It was something of a disappointment, tho; I expected some cosmic purpose behind all this body exchange business. But Mr. Vance saw fit to let it fizzle.

As I said, I like "IF . . ." stories. But, for some reason Mr. Kuttner's Failed to click. Why? I dunno. Nowhere as good as "Voice of the Lobster" (man—or is it sheep?—that was a funny yarn! Sequel coming?).

The short stories run sans comment thus: "A Walk in The Dark"—Clarke; "Spacemate"—Sheldon; "Batfling Bolto"—Hubbard.

Ley's article was of great interest. Articles by de Camp & Richardson would be appreciated.

Betcha the birds hiding behind the false whiskers you put on the Flying Pan "Open Letter" will really raise a howl come the December ish.

While on the subject of letters I must congratulate you,

Mr. Mutton. You've come along way towards an adult Reader's department since the puerile days of 1947. Then, you know, everyone wrote Joe Kennedy-like or Chad Oliver-like letters, which entirely lacked the genius for phrase and meaning those lads had.

One final word: Please, no more Bergey, Finlay, Lawrence, Paul.—1163 Hague Ave., St. Paul, 4, Minn.

Can anyone think of a more fitting final letter than one by a man named Zwirner. It would be difficult to end a telephone directory with anything more appropriate. James, you can have our finale spot whenever you choose to write us.

And now we're beginning to feel like a song title we have long wanted to present to Abe Burrows—*You're crawling around in my woodwork—I can't get you out of my mind.* So let's end it all for the nonce, huh? See you soon.

—THE EDITOR.

BLUFF PLAY

(Concluded from page 119)

"What else could they think—without their young Copeland around to tip them off? How could they ever guess that an imaginary fleet sprouted out of a chunk of blue Venusian soil, brought back to Earth on a tire of one of their own spacecraft?"

A strange dawning glow began to come over me—a thing wonderful to feel. *They* hadn't attacked us because *their* fear of our terrible reprisals had been restored. Somewhere underneath an involved net of bluff and secrecy, as yet beyond the deepest penetration of their agents, *they* had been forced to conclude that we *must* have a fleet—just as our President had said. Probably now they'd never dare to attack.

"Was the President really in on this wild deal?" I blurted.

"He sure was," Brand answered, grinning. "But I had some preliminary trouble contacting him by phone and flying East to see him secretly."

"Then it was all your idea," I growled.

"Not entirely, Joe," he answered. "Rhoda, here, did her share." They exchanged glances. You know what kind. Yeah—fond.

I guess I was still stupid. It was too much for me to figure out all at once.

"But she hit me with a hammer," I snapped. "She knocked me and a guard cold!"

"I had to, Joe," she replied for herself. "To let the snooper escape you and take that photograph of his home. And to make his getaway seem more convincing to him—thinking that he had sympathizers here. I'm sorry, Joe—but look what I had to do for the sake of verisimilitude. Sit in the klink for fourteen days!" She chuckled.

I laughed aloud in sheer pleasure. It was good to feel safe and strong again—and the friend of some clever folks. It was good to think about a wedding. It was good, even, to think that people are unpredictable. It was good to see old Nils Narvaard's gentle smirk.

I didn't need the rumors that started an hour later—that on the other side of the Pole a nation long burdened with the burden of armament and cheated of a promise had begun a revolt.

The best part was seeing our ships roar up into the blue on their first test-run. Some of them would be free for Nils Narvaard's kind of interests now. They'd be going out to the Moon and Mars and Venus—out to high romance.

Probably I'd be able to go along.

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The FRYING PAN



A Fanzine Commentary

WE think we have spotted a trend among fanzine editors, one that seems to be on the wax rather than the wane of recent months. It is not a trend so much alarming as it is alarmed—in fact, some of the lads seem ready either to 1.) tear out their hair, 2.) beat Gene Krupa choruses on their bosoms or 3.) burst into tears of sheer frustration.

Prize example in this torrent of self-recrimination and nervous qualification is offered by *The Editor's Page* of the otherwise excellent **SPACE MAGAZINE**, published at 1228 15th Street N.W., Washington 6, D. C., and edited by one Clyde T. Hanback, who says in part—

... Although we were supposed to have an article in relation to another scientific film, we had to change our layout because it has not been sent in. The article was to be on "Rocket-ship X-M" and was to be written by the Publicity Department of Lippert Productions.

The line-up for this issue is as follows:

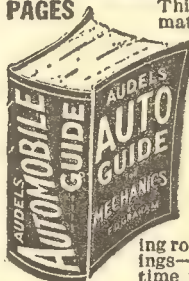
Although for the most part **GLORY PLANET** is somewhat crude in plot, there may be some of you that may find other parts exciting. Originally, we intended to have it serialized but when we found a way to reduce costs and still expand the zine, we decided to leave it as it is.

Also in this issue is the first of two parts of a list of **STF PUBLIC RELATIONS ARTICLES** and other articles that may be of interest to fans. The research for the above department took two days to complete. For the most part, I have the magazines in which they appeared.

The story, **THE INVADER STAR** is of a
[Turn page]

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plot which has been used many times before, but Bob Silverberg has given this "creation of the solar system" a new twist, which may or not be of immense interest to fans and readers of science-fiction.

With this issue finds the termination of Honorary Memberships in the A.S.S.

Some of them will continue as members until the official disbanding date of the Stf Fan Division of the A.R.A., while some of these shall continue to receive a special subscription after the disbanding takes place.

We hope to be able to give fans an outstanding First Anniversary issue. Several of the pros of Science-Fiction and Rocketry said they would contribute in the near future and I will endeavor to try and get them to contribute something which will give us a good anniversary issue.

Mr. Carter, the A.R.A. president, has consented to write something for our fourth issue to be entitled SPACEWAY TO JUPITER. According to his summary of it, this might be a good story. Also, we intend to have articles on rocket research after the end of this year.

Naturally, if we were to discuss our magazines in such terms with our readers we'd be out of a job instantler. We'd deserve to be. And while the amateur magazine editor may have more leeway toward candor anent what he has printed or plans to print, we wonder if Mr. Hanback isn't carrying the deprecatory business just a trifle too far.

His first paragraph is an apologia for not having a *Rocketship X-M* piece as promised—through no fault of his own.

His third paragraph is an apologia for his lead story. According to Hanback it is "somewhat crude in plot" although "there *may* be some of you that *may* find other parts exciting." In other words, he implies that most of you *may* not.

In his fifth paragraph he apologizes for the Silverberg story, saying that it "is of a plot which has been used many times before," which "may or not be of immense interest." Don't walk, run to the nearest exit is his advice.

As for the hopeful First Anniversary issue, Mr. Hanback says that he "will endeavor to try" to get contributions. Which is a little like saying he is going to swallow to eat his food.

More Bends

Nor are Mr. Hanback and SPACE MAGAZINE the only one guilty of this excessive attack of the bends (over backwards, we mean). Editor D. R. Fraser of EUSIFANSO, 146 Street,

Eugene, Oregon, drops the following little duck of a paragraph into the middle of his July issue editorial—

Also, let me, for a moment, draw your attention to pages 12 and 13. The story there-on isn't too good but it could be a hell-of-a-lot worse. It's up to you to make it better and relieve it of its unfinished condition. Just write an ending in 750 words or less and send it to us no later than July 20th. The best entered will be in the August issue.

Apparently Editor Fraser was first struck with qualms, then grew defiant, then in despair decided to let his reader or readers do his work for him. We can only wish them luck.

Plenty of other fanzines show the same lack of satisfaction with the material they run—a dissatisfaction in most cases that is fully justified. However, we feel that it is silly to discourage the reader before he even tackles the 'zine.

Let the Readers Speak

Editors, like writers, have a way of getting inside the tales upon which they are working to such an extent that objective judgment is apt to be nullified. We have found it better policy to put out the best material we can find and then let the readers tell us. They have and do and presumably will. However, we have had many, many surprises in story reaction—some pleasant, some quite the reverse.

But it is not especially sound policy to put the bullet through one's temple before the horses have gone to the post.

By way of a concluding note we go back to Mr. Hanback and SPACE MAGAZINE. On page 43 of his July issue, just above a black-bordered subscription solicitation advertisement for the magazine, is the following—

MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE REPORT

Only one member has been made since the last issue of Space Magazine.
5208 Claude Plum Jr.
526 Ellis Street, San Francisco 9, California

If only the last two digits in front of Mr. Plum's name had been reversed The American Rocketry Association would have added up to exactly one mile.

Next Issue: I, THE UN-MORTAL, a Novel by Emmett McDowell

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW

THE CASTLE OF IRON by L. Sprague de Camp & Fletcher Pratt, Gnome Press, New York (\$2.50).

Continuing the adventures of hapless Harold Shea and the devious Professor Reed Chambers inaugurated recently in book form in *The Incomplete Enchanter* (Prime Press, Philadelphia), when Shea became first involved in the world of the Norse gods and then in that of the *Faerie*



Queen, whence he brought back the fair Belphebe to wife.

In this even daffier sequel Professor Chambers, in an effort to prevent his snow-maiden light-of-love from melting in the first hot spell, has conveyed not only his ice-born Lady Florimel and himself but Belphebe into the troubadoric magic land of the Chanson of Roland.

Shea, in prosaic Ohio of this world, promptly finds himself about to be charged with murder, kidnaping and sundry other capital offenses, when Chambers, in need of help whisks him, along with a screwball fellow psychologist, a cop and one other adjacent character, into a Mohammedan heaven—a sort of way station.

Shea and his screwball pal manage to join Chambers, who is operating more or less happily in the enchanted castle of Moorish wizard Atlantes, and Shea at once learns that his beloved Belphebe has become

[Turn page]



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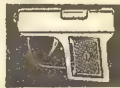
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inextricably and schizophrenically involved with a local maiden of somewhat similar name and personality.

From then on in the ratrace is as merry and fantastic as the most devout de Camp-Pratt fan could wish. We don't intend to spoil it in these columns and will content ourselves with a most hearty recommend. Should be enjoyed by all those who love cats, love dogs and detest toast buttered only in the middle.

LANCELOT BIGGS: SPACEMAN by Nelson Bond, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York (\$2.50)

Mr. Bond has come up in Biggs with a sort of non-servile Admirable Crichton, a space genius who rises from Fourth Mate to near-Master of the good old S.S. Saturn, walking off with the captain's daughter in the process—and making him like it as he somehow gets the ship through jam after interplanetary jam.

Typical Biggs adventure is the opener, in which he ruins a live-vegetable cargo for Venus, then saves the day by transmuting it into gold via cosmic rays. On another, after doing a like job on a cargo of seeds for Iapetus, he saves the day by coming up with a botanically incredible blue rose.

If anything detracts from these stories it is their occasional repetitiousness. Run as a magazine series this would not be too noticeable—but with their assemblage between a single pair of covers it is a definite weakness, as is the incredible resourcefulness of Biggs. Still—it's good fun.

MINIONS OF THE MOON by William Gray Beyer, Gnome Press, New York (\$2.50).

A Sleeper-Wakes story—this time with one Mark (last name missing) coming out of a new anaesthesia for an appendectomy some 6,000 years too late. He finds himself in a primitive post-atomic world controlled by two linked sets of Russian brains and a friendly disembodied spirit who nurtures him safely through to supermanship.

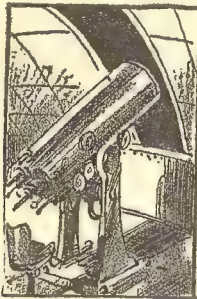
It is our feeling the Omega, the spirit's, tutelage is so all-embracing that it manages to destroy such elements of suspense as the story might otherwise have had. As it is the reader simply cannot worry. After all, old Omega is always on hand when needed to take care of whatever dangers may arise and even to give Mark a suitable love life for the immortality ahead.

—THE EDITOR.

SCIENCE FICTION FORECAST

For The Next Issue

COMES February, comes a great desire to shed the shackles of winter and head for the great outdoors, the open road and all that. Some go north, via the ski trains, some head for the rains of Califor-



nia, others hegira to the sunny climes of Florida and Mexico.

But you and ourselves are going to take a lot longer trip than that in the next issue—via the vehicles of Jack Vance and Emmett McDowell. We're going out on a double jaunt into space itself. Suffice it to say that where Mr. Vance's unusually fine short novel, **OVERLORDS OF MAXUS**, fails to take us among the uncharted star-planets. Mr. McDowell's equally fine ditto, **I, THE UN-MORTAL**, does.

In **OVERLORDS OF MAXUS** we travel with Gardius, whose efforts to get his sister freed from the slave markets of Maxus result in his becoming involved in the efforts of the neo-legendary Arman to hypnotize half a galaxy with the magic of his voice, his dream, his magnificent masculinity.

He also becomes involved with all sorts and degrees of interplanetary officialdom and with the siren Mardien, whose loyalties lie inscrutable beneath her lip-service to the would-be human god.

Word Magic

This is what can honestly be called a "pulsing" story—for as readers of recent issues of this magazine and its companion, **STARTLING STORIES**, well know, Mr.

[Turn page]

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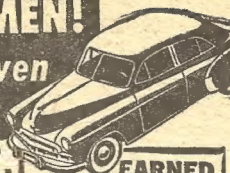
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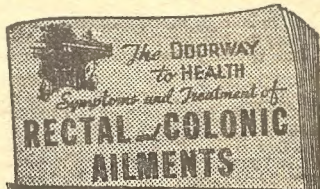
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